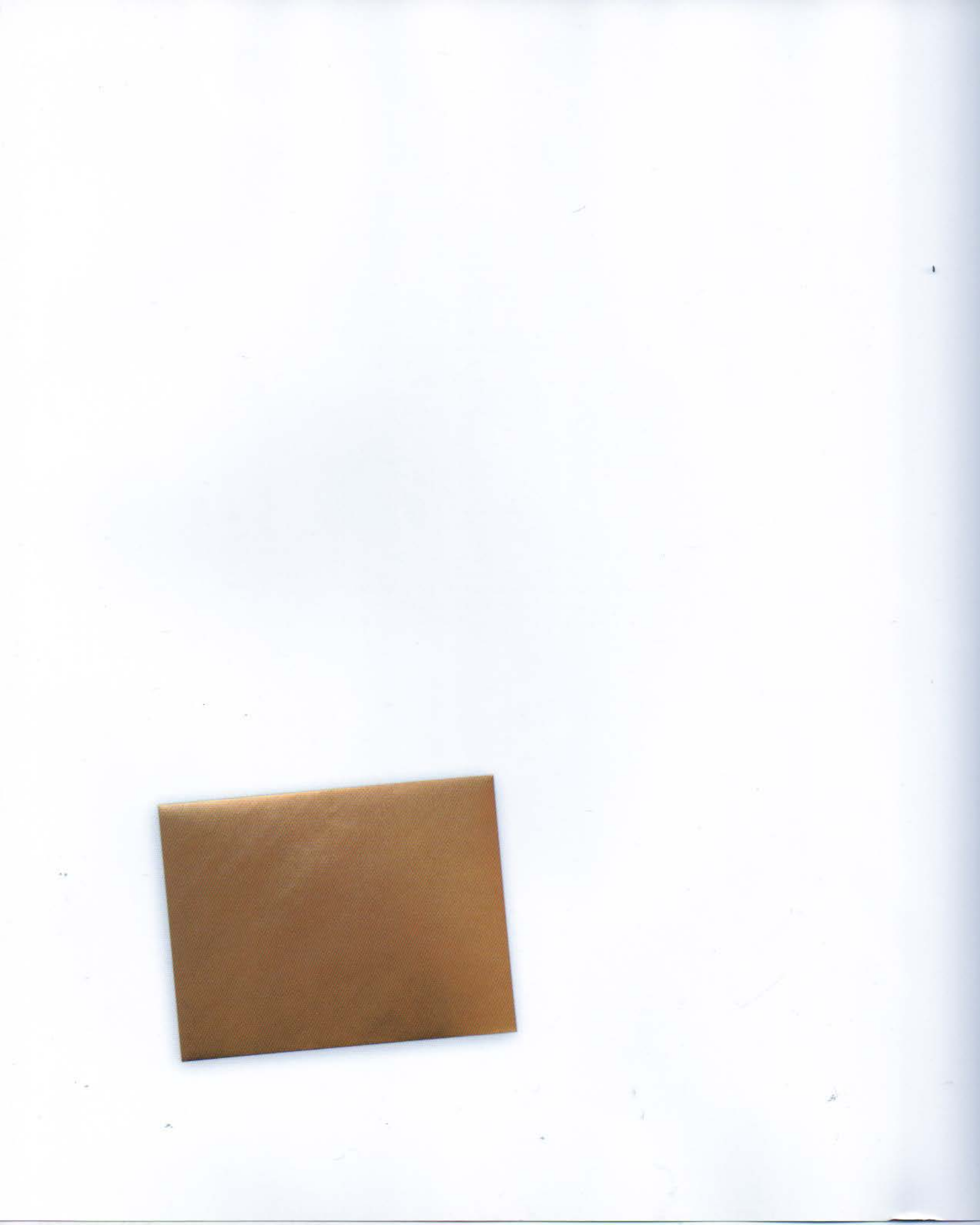






Stop. Don't. You can't do it. You might think that you've kept a studied eye on what's happened in gaming throughout 2005, but you cannot put a name to all of the faces that appear on this issue's cover. You can't even name all of the *games* to which they belong. And yet they've all featured in these pages over the last 12 months – and we don't even attempt to cover anything like all of the games that come our way.

The truth is that nowadays there are more people working in more teams in more territories working on more platforms on more videogames of more styles than ever before. Videogaming just keeps getting bigger. More games are being released, more editorial is being written about them in magazines, newspapers and across the internet, and, collectively, we're spending more time playing them.

Is it all getting just a little *too* big? That's a discussion for another time. What we can say, today, is that 2005 has seen some truly innovative ideas appear among all the sequels, spin-offs and cash-ins that are to be expected when any entertainment medium begins to reach maturity. We recognise these achievements, and more, this month in **Edge**'s annual awards, whose rundown begins on p68.

Elsewhere this month we meet Keita *Katamari Damacy* Takahashi (see p54), a man who in some respects personifies contemporary game innovation – even if he doesn't always seem to believe it himself. It's inspiration from work such as his that we most look forward to seeing in 2006.

(OK, fine, some of you are still thinking that you can, actually, put games to all of those faces. If so, send your list in an email entitled 'Cover challenge' to edge@futurenet.co.uk – we'll give a prize or two to the correct or closest effort. Tied entries will go into a draw. Closing date for entries is January 25. We'll print the full list of games next issue. Have a happy New Year.)



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Distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, 5th Floor, Low Rise Building, Kings Reach Tower, Stamford Street, London. 0207 633 3333.

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PRODUCTION OF EDGE
Hardware: Power Macintosh G4, G5
Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Microsoft Office
Typography: (Adobe®) Frutiger Light, Regular, Bold, Black, Italic. Max (TF/LF) Light, Regular, Semi-Bold, Bold, Black, Italic. Simian (Display/Text) Orangutan, Chimpanzee, Gorilla. QType Book, Medium, Bold, Italic. Prensa Book, Bold, Italic. Bad Excuse, Bad Excuse Solid

Printed in the UK by Polestar, Chantry

Edge is brought to you by Future Publishing Ltd, the makers of PC Gamer, GamesMaster, PlayStation2 Official Magazine-UK, PlayStation World, NGC and PSM2.

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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR). www.futureplc.com

"Some of these buildings are over 20 years old"







ABC **31,078**
January-June 2005
(Audit Bureau of Circulation)



CONTENTS

JANUARY

This month

Every month

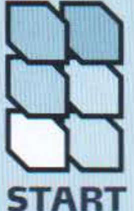


CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype

Review









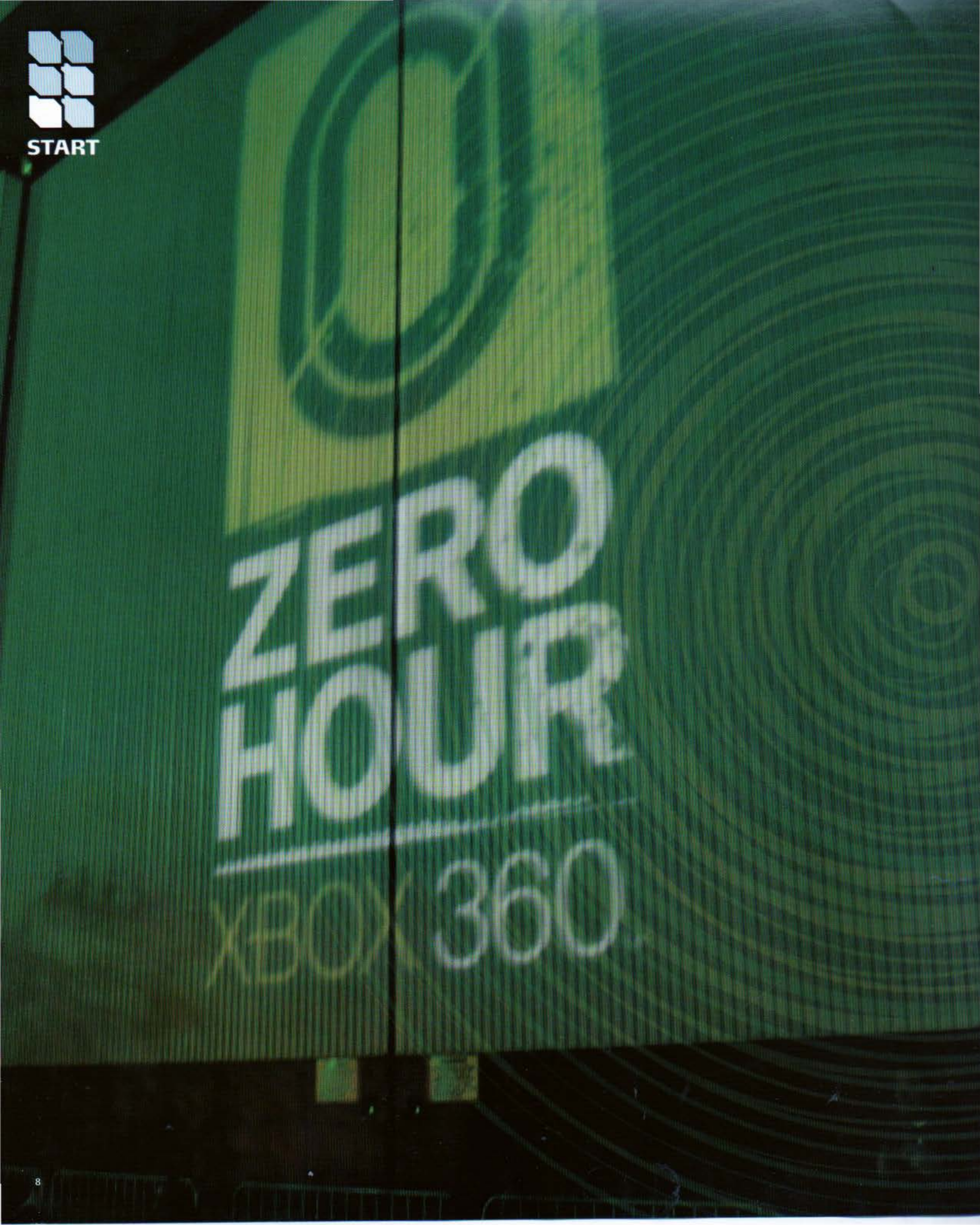
START










ZERO
HOUR
XBOX 360

HARDWARE

Xbox 360 touches down

How Microsoft's console won the west – if you could get one. Plus: ATI on 360 versus PS3



Much as he did during the launch of the original Xbox, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates joined the first 360 customers at the Seattle branch of electronics retailer Best Buy, cashing in on photo opportunities and a spot of multiplayer *Project Gotham Racing 3*

Sucker punches seldom have time to build up a great deal of force. In the case of the global (well, almost) launch of Xbox 360, it was inadequate force of numbers that weakened Microsoft's. Not that the Redmond giant scrimped on the propaganda. Large-scale events in Amsterdam and the Mojave Desert carried its HD ideals, via the invited press, to markets in Europe and the US, along with a show of defiant optimism for Japan. But the dominant message for most in the weeks following launch has turned out to be this: we can get 360 into your collective consciousness, but not necessarily into your homes.

It seems obvious now, and it probably would have been sooner had everyone not been so preoccupied – as well they should have been – with the quality of 360's games. But even the largest software company in the world couldn't produce a reserve of consoles for a world of gamers, for a launch window of mere weeks (that's hardware launch window, of course). A crucial objective has been met – 360 is now, its competition is not – but at what cost to consumers who, having missed out on day one, now see Christmas as the point at which disappointment becomes dismay?

Zero Hour – the US launch party held in a cavernous aircraft hangar in Palmdale, California on the night of November 21 – was a curious kickoff. Touted as an extravagant soiree for industry folk and press, it offered no real focus beyond the brand's Zen-of-gaming ideology (unlike X05 which, as Peter Moore then said, was 'all about the games'). But once 360's move into the public domain became imminent, attention rapidly fixed upon one pressing issue: where and how best to buy.

So, what does Microsoft say about what happened next?

"As we came closer to launch," explains Euro product marketing director **Richard Teversham**, "we were able to get a more accurate, detailed picture of console availability based on manufacturing runs. Early on we informed retailers and distributors that numbers were preliminary and that final numbers could and probably would change based on manufacturing output. Retailers understand our belief that launch is not just about day one. This is the first time a console has had a near-simultaneous global launch, and of course this in itself presents challenges. Demand was unprecedented and far outstripped supply."

The overwhelming consensus from those who had the pleasure of deciding was that 360 is an excellent machine, its firstparty launch titles an

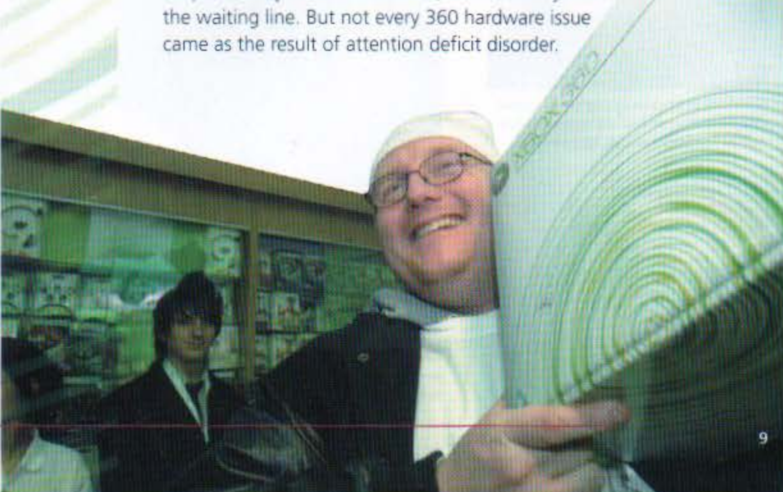
"Retailers understand that launch is not just about day one... Demand was unprecedented and far outstripped supply"

auspicious handful of the good and the great. This news, however, only exacerbated the woes of the hapless majority who failed to find one, and played into the hands of dealers intent on exploiting them. EBay president Meg Whitman declared that 40,000 consoles had been sold or resold in the US via the online auctioneer – a staggering number since it equates to perhaps ten per cent of the total sold overall. Many of these would have originated in high street retailers, of course, where the inevitable queues/campsites had formed (in extreme cases) over a day earlier.

Among them were the expected attention seekers. The team behind www.smashmyxbox.com, for instance, stood merrily at the front of a Best Buy queue on day one, securing their opportunity to then take a hammer to Microsoft's new machine (as paid for by their site's visitors) before the eyes of the waiting line. But not every 360 hardware issue came as the result of attention deficit disorder.



Police were on hand at London's flagship Game when the clock ticked over to December 2. Many walked away empty-handed, but there was little trouble. The first 360 sale (right)











A number of users were vocal about their new machines locking up, overheating or otherwise not working. No big surprise: the same occurs after every launch. But few others would defy the consensus that the machine was enormously loud. The volume of its optical drive and case fans while playing games was a sticking point of our report last issue, and it's one that retail hardware and media has since failed to address. Additional concerns were raised regarding 360's tendency to scratch discs when being tilted from a horizontal to vertical stance, but Microsoft has never shied from warning its customers of this possibility and has made no pledges of financial compensation (though in some instances is said to have offered complimentary copies of *Perfect Dark Zero*). There's good news, however, in that the machine's power supply *has* shrunk considerably since debug kits were distributed among the press: its dimensions are approximately two thirds of what they were.

"The internet has the ability to really amplify the voices of a small group of people who may be having problems," says Teversham. "It's important to note that there is no systemic issue with Xbox 360. Each incident is unique and these customer enquires are being handled on a case-by-case basis. The return rate is significantly lower than the CE industry average of three to five per cent."

Backwards compatibility – a feature of debatable importance – proved a mixed blessing for those early adopters keen (or forced for whatever reason) to try it. Titles heavily advertised as compatible such as *Halo 2* were largely praised, their upscaled and antialiased visuals taking a satisfying upwards hop. Other entries on the legacy list, however, didn't fare so well. Framerate is considered the main issue with 360's emulation, and titles such as *Ninja Gaiden* indeed suffer from ruinous slowdown.

Few have let such niggles sway their purchasing decision. But if 360's primary market could become a place where considerably more wanted an Xbox 360 than actually had one, then what of markets such as the UK, with launch days fixed for a mere fortnight later? The reality, come midnight of December 2, proved worse than expected. Certain online retailers had already turned their backlog of preorders





Members of the London queues enjoyed complimentary hot drinks as launch day and its inevitable drama approached



Suspicions that Microsoft would make a killing on peripherals thanks to last-ditch Core pack purchases proved well founded. "We had the same situation with peripherals as we had with the consoles," a Game spokesperson revealed. "Demand far outstripped supply"









Xbox 360's launch line-up covered most based, although some titles slipped, and a number of quickfire ports did little to sell the hi-def dream

into lotteries, those who'd ordered at the earliest opportunity reporting that they'd gained nothing over those who'd left it until late. At many independent retailers, the lucky few who managed to buy 360s were escorted out via the back door with their purchases wrapped in black bin liners, leaving dozens of empty-handed customers to vent their frustration at counter staff. **Kirsty Payne** – a spokesperson for UK retailer Game – confirms that demand in the UK had outweighed supply by an enormous margin. And this was a company far better prepared than most.

"It went very well, actually," she claims. "At our flagship store in London, we invited everyone down to the branch [some 200 people are said to have queued] and warned them of the stock situation. People completely understood, even if they didn't get their machine. Because we anticipated a shortage of stock we limited the number of preorders and so managed to fulfil all our preorders at launch. We could have taken many more deposits for the 360. However, we didn't want to disappoint customers by not being able to supply." It was further suggested that the company fully expected to clear its backlog of newer orders by Christmas. "We will be receiving weekly deliveries and, being the largest UK specialist games retailer, we hope to be back into a free stock situation as soon as possible. We're recommending that customers check the website or their local store for stock updates."

Not everyone in the retail community, however, joined Game in opening its doors to midnight masses. By the time the staff of practically every high street electronics supplier (many shrewd

"The lucky few who managed to buy 360s were escorted out via the back door with their purchases wrapped in black bin liners, leaving others to vent frustration at counter staff"





Though many were disappointed on day one, stores such as Game managed minor restocks on subsequent days. It took mere hours after word had spread, however, for sold-out signs to return

Microsoft was the big winner in terms of game sales, with *PD0* and *PGR3* (right) proving the most popular launch titles. *Kameo* (bottom), however, performed less capably. From a thirdparty standpoint it was no surprise to see EA offer up the biggest range, although Activision pushed it with ports of *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* and *Quake 4* (centre, left and right)









The games commence

Sega's Condemned proves a surprisingly big hit at launch

It's little surprise to see *PDZ* enjoying the highest attach rate for Xbox 360s purchased in the UK (at least during its first two days on sale, which the sales chart, right, represents) given the visibility of its profile. What is of interest is the relatively poor showing of *Kameo*, another high-profile Rare title but one unable to shift more than *Condemned, Need For Speed: Most Wanted* or *Call Of Duty 2*. It seems that *Kameo*'s styling may not be a perfect fit for early adopters of Microsoft's new console.

1. Perfect Dark Zero (Microsoft)
2. Project Gotham Racing 3 (Microsoft)
3. Call Of Duty 2 (Activision)
4. Condemned: Criminal Origins (Sega)
5. Need For Speed: Most Wanted (EA)
6. Kameo: Elements Of Power (Microsoft)
7. FIFA '06 (EA)
8. Quake 4 (Activision)
9. Peter Jackson's King Kong (Ubisoft)
10. Tiger Woods PGA Tour '06 (EA)
11. Gun (Activision)
12. Tony Hawk's American Wasteland (Activision)
13. Madden NFL '06 (EA)
14. Amped 3 (2K Sports)
15. NBA Live '06 (EA)





Xbox 360's launch line-up catered to all tastes, not just hobbyists', thanks to the appearance of *PGA Tour '06* and *King Kong*. Less-mainstream fare arrived in the form of *Condemned: Criminal Origins*

customers targeting less obvious chains such as Boots and Asda) arrived at work to instruct queues of people to go home and catch some sleep, the scale of the situation was already becoming clear, as was the drama. While the second wave of hopefuls descended upon high street stores by dawn's early light, accounts were spreading across the internet that detailed underhand tactics of retailers keen to capitalise on what little stock they'd received. Many – Game included – were accused of offering desperate customers the hardware they'd preordered only if a bundle of games and peripherals was coupled to it. Faced with an unexpected price hike to the reported region of £550, it goes without saying that most would either balk at or be incapable of meeting the revised cost of such a package. We asked Game to comment.

"It seems to be the case that most people who weren't buying any games at all at launch were simply selling their machines on eBay"

"Absolutely no one is forced to purchase a bundle upon launch," says Payne, "and very few people would actually consider buying a 360 anyway without at least one game to play on it when they arrived home. We found the attachment rate of peripherals and games to be very high anyway, and it seems to be the case that most of those who weren't buying any games at all were simply selling their new machines on eBay."



Whether Game was an offender or not, several others were undeniably guilty of exploiting the situation to shameless degrees. While it may not have been the company's official policy, rogue branches of CEX were seen to be tagging their limited 360 consoles with prices as high as £800 – roughly in line with the going rate on eBay throughout those frenzied early days. To make matters worse for UK consumers, reports from other European territories such as Italy suggested an abundance of Core packs on the shelves, pushed past the point of being realistic imports by the prohibitive price of having some well-meaning soul ship them over.

Such solidarity, though – the kind traditionally reserved for natural disasters and freak incidents of British sporting success – proved contagious. Many who somehow found themselves with spare 360s would quell their urge to profiteer and offer them at retail price,



Q&A: RICHARD HUDDY European developer relations manager, ATI



The launch titles make varied use of Xbox 360's rendering ability; when do you think we'll reach the point where developers are using it to its capacity?

That's a pretty tough one. It's always the case that console games get better as the console matures and you build up that expertise, but there are a couple of different kinds of expertise that you need to build up here. One is just coming to terms with that new console, and the other is the fact that there are new techniques in the graphics chip that are possible now. Previously, these wouldn't have been something you could consider; you have to carry them over from the PC world of raytracers or crazy places like that, which you would never have considered when you were doing graphics on a GPU before. I think it's probably going to take something like a couple of years before people really come to terms with all the clever stuff you can do there and you see progress really start shutting down. One of the reasons for that is, I think that DirectX is a nice thin API and two years is therefore a relatively short time; I think with PS2 and Xbox we've seen games get better for probably three or four years into the lifetime of a console and I think that'll be a bit faster, people will be able to get closer to 100 per cent much quicker on Xbox 360 because of the thinner DX layer and the improvements in XNA that Microsoft are doing right now and planning in the future. But it'll still take quite a bit of time for people to learn it.

I think it's probably going to take something like a couple of years before people really come to terms with all the clever stuff you can do there and you see progress really start shutting down

Some games, such as *Perfect Dark Zero*, use a kind of shininess in their parallax mapping which sometimes looks quite inappropriate. Is this kind of thing going to be 'the new lens flare' on 360?

[Laughs.] I see what you mean, and at the moment the obvious use of parallax mapping tends to be in these rocky surfaces, with that kind of local detail. Whether you really need the shininess on there... I guess that's quite a nice way of using up the extra power of the hardware – if you're a graphics programmer you can point at it and it looks cool, but you are in the danger area of being accused of just doing eye candy for its own sake. I think the big thing that we really ought to expect in the longer term is people moving over to high dynamic range where a better fidelity of lighting is available. This old-fashioned trouble of having numbers in the range of 0 to 255, just the integers, where you get either sod-all precision or sod-all range – you just can't get things right – that can completely go away, and I think that's the big change that we're all excited about with the shader model 3 hardware that we have on both PC and Xbox 360. It's going to be the long-term change and in an important sense it's not just eye candy because it really is a much more faithful treatment of the way lighting works in the real world. It'll look like eye candy to begin with because people with overuse it, and you get overdone bloom and flare effects.

Things like parallax mapping, I like them; I think they're useful for saving memory footprint – it's a much more compact way of representing local graphics data. The trouble with so much computer graphics is that we end up with uncluttered worlds. Until we saw things like *Far Cry* with bushes and greenery everywhere we were kind of used to the idea that the ground would be, well, grassy coloured but a bit flat, and you'd see a few trees dotted around and maybe lumps and rocks. And you'd be steered down a path and it might as well be flat for all it was worth to you. But putting in a lot of detail is important for a realistic-looking world: the walls around me are pretty much flat but there's lots and lots of other stuff where there's lots of local detail – the clothing I wear, for example, has soft folds of cotton, and that kind of detail is hard to represent without something like normal mapping or bump mapping. And that's a good use – I think we'll get a richer level of detail in the







Early figures suggest that twice the number of Premium packs were sold as the lesser Core packs. Once stocks reached crisis point, however, more discerning gamers scrambled for whatever they could find, spending extra on hard drives and accessories



via internet forums, to those who missed out. The same message boards filled with reports of fleeting stock, with members often attempting to purchase multiple machines for the benefit of their online friends. Few were successful, however, as many stores implemented a one-per-customer policy to prevent online traders cashing in.

While no official sales figures were available at the time of going to press, ChartTrack has suggested that 360 shipped approximately 70,000 during its first three days on sale in the UK – just clear of the 69,000 GameCubes sold during that machine's first week and a new record for a so-called static console. The ratio of Premium to Core pack sales is said to be 2:1, though that's more a reflection of stock shipments than customer choice, with 360s of any configuration becoming desirable once numbers began dwindling. The benefits of available hardware are further made clear when including Sony's PSP (admittedly a handheld) in the comparison: 185,000 were sold within three days of its September launch.

"Our process is to continually supply the channel week after week," Teversham contests, "where our competitors have traditionally shipped units into the market for launch and then re-supplied many weeks or months later. Our method is good for retailers and consumers because it provides predictability. Initially, there may be fewer quantities than anticipated in some areas, but in the aggregate we are not changing our 90-day forecast of 2.75 to 3 million units. Our manufacturing facilities are running at full capacity, churning out as many consoles as humanly possible. Thousands of workers are literally at it around the clock."

Though every Christmas launch sees a stock shortage that attracts both headlines and scepticism, this is no fabricated crisis. Never has the hobbyist been hit so hard by such mainstream concerns, and never have those transpired in so many territories at once. But for all the apparent disarray, few European gamers should feel particularly aggrieved. This is, after all, a near-simultaneous launch across all of those major territories. While many have had to envy their neighbour's exciting new toy for a few weeks, at least it isn't a different country's.



Eastern promises

360's biggest challenge lies beyond the US and Europe

360 hadn't launched in Japan by the time we went to press, but the December 10 release date for that territory was as steady a fixture in Microsoft's calendar as those it had already met in Europe and the US. This may have been one occasion when the company counted its blessings for its inability to woo the eastern market, the relatively low number of units required for that arm of 360's launch easing its restocking operation elsewhere. A survey conducted by Japan's Famitsu magazine suggested that less than half of participating consumers planned to actively avoid 360, though it failed to provide any real sense of its popularity. Asian launches outside of Japan are currently scheduled for the spring.

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world from things like parallax bump mapping. In the first place people will overuse it but hopefully, just like lens flare, somebody will grab you by the scruff of the neck and say, 'Stop overusing it – make it look about right'. Although I'm a programmer by nature, I have to say that so long as the artists are in control we're headed in the right direction for the future.

How do you think your work on 360 measures up to PS3?

I take a fairly robust view on this. The Xbox 360 GPU is designed to be a console GPU – that's what we set out to produce when we started the collaboration with Microsoft: let's build a really powerful, really flexible kind of general-purpose GPU which doesn't have performance cliffs where if you do certain things suddenly the performance crashes down by a factor of two or something like that; let's have things pretty predictable and easy to work with, and let's generate about the best performance that we can – so we went for things like the unified shaders and so on. The PS3 has been designed in a quite different way because of the way the process worked. We sat down with Microsoft and said: 'This is what we think we can build', and they said: 'Yes, but what about...?' And they started picking holes in our design, so we came up with a collaborative

> Our GPUs are custom-designed components, and that's one of the fundamental reasons why I think Xbox 360 technology is likely to outperform PlayStation 3 technology by a pretty healthy margin in the long run

design. They didn't put a spec in front of us and say: 'How much for this?' That definitely wasn't the dialogue – in fact that would make it more of a monologue; it would be kind of bidding on prices and so on. Instead what we have is a very collaborative design. With the PS3 my understanding of what happened is that they had three different internal hardware solutions – at one point, for example, as I understand it there was a proposal to use multiple Cell processors just to handle the graphics. And towards the end of the process, the story goes, they took a look at the three internal tenders and decided that none of them would actually do; none of them would deliver the kind of performance and quality that games programmers could use and would make for a good cost-effective console, so they had to go out and shop around. And one of the places they shopped was Nvidia, and what Nvidia did was say: 'Well, you've got this relatively short timeframe, you've got roughly this kind of budget, I'll tell you what we'll do: we'll do you a good price on what is essentially the 7800GTX'. So that's a PC chip, and if you look at the architecture of the two consoles you can see that we've done bizarre things that they haven't. We've built ten megabytes of dedicated ED RAM which knows how to antialias and so on, because that's a specific way of addressing a console's problem. It's bizarre in a PC sense but a special skill for a console builder. Whereas the PS3 has 256 meg of system memory and 256 meg of graphics memory and it communicates through what is effectively a PCI Express bus. It uses GDDR3 fast memory; it's essentially a PC graphics design bolted on to a Cell processor and 256 meg of fast system memory...

You make it sound so unrefined!

[Laughs.] Well, yeah, but the tragedy is that it is unrefined. There's a lot of brute force in there – I'd be the last person to admit it, but the truth is that the 7800GTX is a pretty powerful piece of hardware, but it's not very elegant, it hasn't got the kind of: 'Well, how do we design this to be the best possible console we can build for this money?' Instead it's been put together at the end of a quite complicated process. We have two very different design processes. If Microsoft had come to us and said: 'All right, what are we going to do about this graphics chip, then? Let's sign the contract and let's go', but then we'd got two thirds through and they'd said: 'Look, you guys aren't going to deliver – now what are you going to do?' and then walked away from us, they would have ended up with a design very much like the PS3 in some essential characteristics – it would have had to use bought-in components. And our GPUs instead are custom-designed components, and that's one of the fundamental reasons why I think Xbox 360 technology is likely to outperform PlayStation 3 technology by a pretty healthy margin in the long run.

So how about this one: can those E3 PS3 demos be achieved on Xbox 360?

Well, why not take another combative line here? I think it's more likely that they can be realised on an Xbox 360 than they can be on a PS3. Those things are movies generated using whatever DCC software the houses had in mind. The Epic demo was running on a PC, and it was done using an early 7800 in SLI mode, so that was a high-end PC demo, but the movies were generated as movies and dressed up as: 'This is what you can expect from a PS3', but that's probably overstating what the PS3 can do a little bit. Indeed, it's well beyond what we expect the PS3 to be able to do. So I guess we'll just have to see what happens...

SOUND BYTES

"Maybe the blame lies more in our laps than the game reviewer's – after all, what are we giving them to review? Are we just mad because they don't see Shakespeare in our Transformers? ... If we expect games journalists to be better, maybe we need to give them something better to be better at being better with."
Ron Gilbert weighs in on the game journalism debate

"Add in a bit of CSI-style detection and forensic examination to the mix and you have a game that will keep you engrossed well into 2006."
The Times on Sega's concise horror actioner *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, which it presumably advises playing for only 15 minutes each day

"*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* – Player recovers his health by visiting prostitutes then recovers funds by beating them to death and taking their money."
Family Media Guide's 2005's Top 10 Ultra-Violent Video Games picks on a not-very-surprising target

"The best gaming platform of all time is undoubtedly the Atari 2600... The best title ever made in the history of US videogaming was *DragonStomper*. It will never be surpassed because games are no longer comprised of the labour and love of one person. Hats off to *DragonStomper* creator Stephen Landrum!"
Forbes.com writer **Ed Lin**'s Xbox 360 launch commentary takes an unexpected turn

"[Xbox 360 offers] graphics so smooth that the games are closer to being interactive animations than ever before."
We hope **The Times** isn't writing off all those games that really aren't anything like interactive animations

INTERVIEW

How to get ahead in videogaming

Is advertising really about to change how games look and play – and what they cost?

Ask J Allard what he thinks the videogame industry needs to do differently and he has one answer: advertising. He finds it bizarre that the industry isn't moving faster to offset rising game development costs by selling on access to its captive market of young consumers. But talk to gamers about what they dread most about the future of gaming and many will mention the spectre of advertising, anxious about the prospect of the fantasy worlds which currently offer a retreat from reality being contaminated with McDonalds fliers and MTV promos. And there's good reason for apprehension – after a steady spread of product placement into TV and films, the Writers Guild of America and the Screen Actors Guild in the US have recently collaborated on a campaign to focus attention on how much this kind of advertising can undermine the creative process. So, after years of predictions, is advertising really set to saturate gaming? And is there any reason to believe their creative aspirations won't suffer? We sat down with **Geoff Graber** (above right), newly appointed CEO of in-game advert provider Double Fusion, to talk about how adverts could benefit publishers, developers and gamers.

"I always think of Blade Runner, and that Coca-Cola ad on the side of the building – it had a profound effect on the movie. And Minority Report has tons of product placement"

Most game advertising is currently focused on 2D billboards. What's the difference in what Double Fusion is offering?

Our platform is really superior to anyone else's technology on the market today: not only can it deliver static 2D billboards, but also audio- and video-feed formats, and most importantly 3D objects inside the game that can be interactive. I think the last is really critical. It lets you make a complete product placement into the game that the users can interact with – not just an advertisement but something that's part of the game, part of the storyline of the game. It can allow a brand to present itself in a really complete way. Billboards, audio and video are fantastic ways of presenting a product in a virtual space, but if the user can drive through something and have it change the nature of their car, or walk up to a Coke machine, press a button for a can of Coke and drink it, then that's when advertising starts to become part of the game.

With the traditional billboard model, you're aware of what's advertising and what isn't – are you aiming for adverts that become indistinguishable from the overall game?

It's really about enhancing the gameplay experience: think about the city streets you've walked down today – you see brands and ads all the time: some you really notice because they stand out, others you might find yourself thinking about later on, and that's the real world. A game where you have that same kind of environment –







These shots, dummied up by Double Fusion using what they call 'fictional advertisers', show the already familiar face of game advertising: static objects. What Graber promises is that the next wave will bring interactive objected embedded into the game's story and functions









Judge Dredd (left) could straightforwardly include a product like Red Bull, and Funcom has integrated adverts into *Anarchy Online* (top). But will they find it so easy in something like *Age Of Conan* (above)?

whether it's a little bit in the past or far in the future – should be similar. That's what we're aiming for: even if you have a billboard or something like that, it should fit with the game, and that's our responsibility along with that of the publisher – getting the right ads into the right game.

Say you were working on a game with a very futuristic setting, would you work with advertisers to revamp the way they present the product to fit the game?

Absolutely – I think that's absolutely the right model to take, for us to be helping the creative agencies that work with the advertisers, rather than just dealing direct with the advertisers. Because the videogame is a format of its own, just like movies, or television, or online – it's certainly worthy of considering how to approach it creatively. You talk about futuristic settings – I always think of Blade Runner, and that Coca-Cola ad on the side of the building – I remember it because it had a profound impact on the movie. And Minority Report, or a modern movie like that, has tons of product placement but it adds to the sense of place in the movie.

But surely Minority Report took a lot of criticism for being so blatant with its adverts?

Right, there was too much. The problem with product placement in movies is often that they force it on you, right? They make it so you have to slow down and view it, because the advertiser is limited in how much exposure the viewer will have to their product. In a game, they're not – you'll be in that scene for quite a long time, so it doesn't need to be so obvious.

How do you deal with fantastical or futuristic games whose strength is in how unlike reality their worlds are?

I think it can always work if you present it well enough. I guess my point is, don't put an ad for a movie that's coming out today in a game that's taking place a hundred years from now. I think there's probably some creative license involved – it's a brand-new business, but there are obvious things that we *shouldn't* do. I've already seen examples of those out on the market, and I don't want to see them happen again: we're not going to stoop to that. I don't think that's good for anybody.

J Allard believes adverts could lower the retail cost of games. Do you see that happening?

There's a great opportunity for that, and it would be fantastic if that happens. But I don't think it's going to happen right away, as you probably realise: initially, the publishers are going to see it as an additional revenue stream, until they can really see how valuable it is for them. But down the road you might imagine it as like the television market, where there's content that's advertising-supported, and other content that's premium – there's room for both.

Do you think that will lead to split versions – £30 for the ad-free version and £20 for the supported one?

I suppose, but to me the adverts should enhance the game, so you'd be happy to pay more for it. If the game had poor advertisers that you didn't want to see, then I'm not doing my job properly.

Are there any games that you would turn down? Even with a sensitive, creative approach, it's hard to image how you could beneficially integrate advertising into something like *Shadow Of The Colossus*.

I think there's quite a bit that we won't do, but there's a lot of low-hanging fruit – games that are already good matches for advertisers – and we can focus on them for now. I don't want to give the wrong impression by bringing this up, but I joke about getting Ye Olde Pizza Hut into medieval fantasy RPGs – it'd be funny, and gamers could appreciate that tongue-in-cheek humour. *EverQuest II* lets you order pizzas in-game, so why not walk in to a restaurant in the game instead of doing a '/pizza' command? But we haven't even approached anything like this at this point, and there's a lot of other advertising that can fit a lot better – stadiums, racecars, and so on, so we're going for that first.

The integration of games and ads is something that's been talked about for years, but games that incorporate ads and product placements are still the exception. From your experience, how long will it be until it becomes the norm?

I think you'll start seeing it as early as 2006, but 2007's going to be a big year for it. That's when things will change.

Newswire



Illinois game bill falls

Just as the statutory move to impose tougher legislation on the sale and marketing of violent games in America seemed to be rolling, one of its earliest examples has derailed. Judge Matthew S Kennelly at the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois this month handed down a permanent injunction to halt the implementation of the Safe Games Illinois Act, branding it 'unconstitutional' on grounds of freedom of speech after a case brought by, among others, the Illinois Retail Merchants Association. Had it been passed, the bill would have forced retailers to place signs in stores explaining the ESRB rating system, and additional warnings on games featuring explicit content. An additional punitive system would also have been introduced to fine those retailers that failed to comply. Similar bills in Michigan and California remain unaffected, although more court cases are pending.

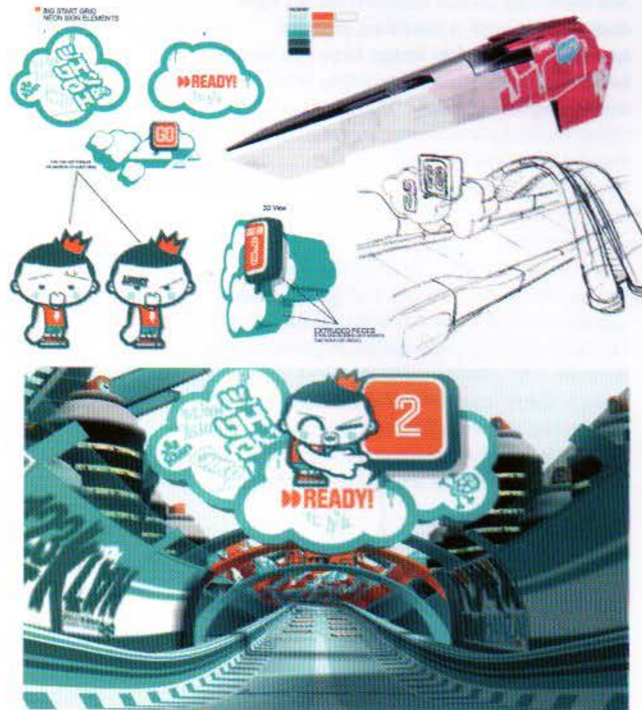
OUT THERE



STAKE A CLAIM

The hurried exodus from Acclaim's offices following its declaration of bankruptcy left more than a few loose ends, as well as enough abandoned games to stock the nation's bargain bins. Now, online auctioneer Maltz Auctions is selling off the US publishing rights to over 200 Acclaim titles, some of which never actually saw the light of day. Current high bids range from $5,000 to $75,000 in the case of the *Extreme G* series, while the majority of the rights on offer have yet to receive any apparent interest. This isn't entirely surprising, however, when you consider that the likes of its mid-'90s Batman titles and *Rise Of The Robots* are among them, as well as unreleased titles such as *100 Bullets*.

• www.maltzauctions.com/acclaimip.htm



The texture density and in each of the Omega tracks testifies to the power of the *Pure* engine. Though limits had to be placed on the artists' creativity, their visions are intact



INTERVIEW

The Omega men

Wipeout Pure's recent Omega pack gives the reputation of downloadable content a nitrous boost, and artists from outside the industry a canvas

The booster packs for *Wipeout Pure* cost nothing, yet cram on to your Memory Stick an increasingly adventurous suite of designer tracks and ships. The latest of them is seen by many to be the greatest piece of bonus content ever produced. Communications director for Studio Liverpool, **Nino Ceraolo**, joins the four contributing artists to take us on a lightning tour.

Can you outline the process by which the Omega tracks were created?

The Omega levels were designed as race tracks first, by the game's designers. They were just tracks floating in nothing, but we had to be sure the play experience stayed true to *Wipeout*. Then images of these from different angles were made as a reference for the artists. Jon, Scien, Mark and Neil were brought into the studio to sit down with the team's artists. They discussed what was possible and we really then gave them free reign to design the environments with no real creative brief, just technical limitations.

Did artist involvement extend to the audio cues triggered by various parts of the track?

Audio cues were something the engine handled as well as animations, and could be factored into the design of the levels. When we briefed the artists, these were something they were told about and they came up with ideas that our sound guys implemented.

Is there an overarching philosophy behind the *Pure* downloadable content programme, or is



Scien on 123klan

www.123klan.com

"The theme is definitely urban and intensely graphic. For example, if you look at the sky in detail, it looks like a mountain, but there's a piece by Mrs Klor and another one of mine in there with some logos and other treatments. We asked the *Wipeout* team to make some buildings with window lights that switched on and off like the rhythm lights from a ghetto blaster, and of course we've bombed the whole city."



Jon Burgerman on Burgertown

www.jonburgerman.com

"It's a wild sojourn through the odd place where my work emanates from. It is an attempt to create a drive-thru piece of work. I wanted to make a track that made you not want to race but to cruise and explore – an antidote to the rest of the game. Whereas in *Wipeout* you must drive through sharp, sometimes cold, masculine and futuristic landscapes, I wanted my track to be the very opposite in its look."

Mark James' Card City is an idea he's had for some time – a metropolis of paper and packaging that houses *Wipeout*'s chicanes







Neil McFarland on Paris Hair

www.parishair.com

"It's a lysergic Formula One blowout. A lot of my work is dreamlike or psychedelic, and this comes across in the design. I love to use hair as a design element, so a lot of lovely ladies' locks got woven around the track. The theme was that of my existing body of work, but that style is why I was chosen to participate in the project. If this was something I did more often I would have the chance to experiment a lot more, but for this one I did what I'm best known for."



Ambitious attempts to integrate the artists' ship designs as well as tracks into the game yield some inspired results, but fail because the *Wipeout* team was unable to prevent them appearing, once downloaded, in the game's overall roster. One of them was a weevil





Buildings and other background objects were all left to the artists to design, only the spiralling paths of the tracks themselves being dictated by the team at Studio Liverpool

each instalment conceived independently?

The philosophy for the downloadable content was to extend the game and to utilise the PSP to do something new. We had planned the first few packs and others came from opportunities that arose when dealing with each territory. Gamma and Classic were planned; the others came about through people seeing the opportunity and asking if we could create content to go with certain promotions. The Omega packs came from us wanting to do something different and using the game as a platform for showing off the various artists' work.

Beside packs such as Omega and Classic, there have been a number of sponsored *Pure* expansions. Does this bother you at all?

> "Omega was created as a thank-you to the European market that waited for the game to be released in Europe and didn't import"

No, it doesn't. The packs may not have been created otherwise, or the costs involved would have had to be recouped by possibly charging for them. Creating new content does not come for free and, as developers, offsetting costs with sponsorship or getting more visibility through sponsorship is a benefit to the consumer – it means more content for them.

Are you able to tell what the uptake is for each of the expansion packs?

There have been a lot of people downloading, and more everyday. As more people get used to going online with PSP to download content, more are getting the extra levels and the benefit it offers. I think the fact that we doubled the size of the game content through downloads is a success in itself, and the reactions we've have had to it quantifies that success.



Mark James on Card City Run

www.akamushi.com

"It came from a character I've been working on for a while: CardBoy. He was released as a toy figure last year and I'm working on the animation at the moment. CardBoy lives in Cardboard City – a city made up of discarded boxes and old toys. It's set under a flyover by a busy road."

What is the reason behind the locking of expansion packs to specific regions?

Omega was created as a thank-you to the European market that waited for the game to be released in Europe and didn't buy an import copy. *Wipeout Pure* was a global release and, as such, had differing opportunities in each territory. Sometimes these didn't overlap, although I would have liked to keep the content release the same globally. It just never happened that way with some of the opportunities that arose.

An extended version of Nino Ceraolo's interview, together with full-length artist discussions, can be found at www.edge-online.com



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Founded just over two years ago, Terra Nova has become the premier collaborative blog for serious discussions on both the business and theory of the entire gamut of virtual worlds – MUDs, MOOs, and MMOs – from academics, journalists, and the architects of said worlds alike.

Topics regularly range from subjects like in-game economies and the ethics of real-world online-item sales from site co-founder and My Tiny Life author Julian Dibbell (currently at work on a book about MMOs as a paying job), griefing, to the general ins-and-outs of creating and maintaining a virtual world (*Second Life* vice president Cory Ondrejka is also a frequent contributor).

Always entertaining and frequently enlightening, Terra Nova is an essential daily read for anyone with an interest in the goings on of online worlds.

Site: Terra Nova
URL: terranova.blogs.com/



Newswires

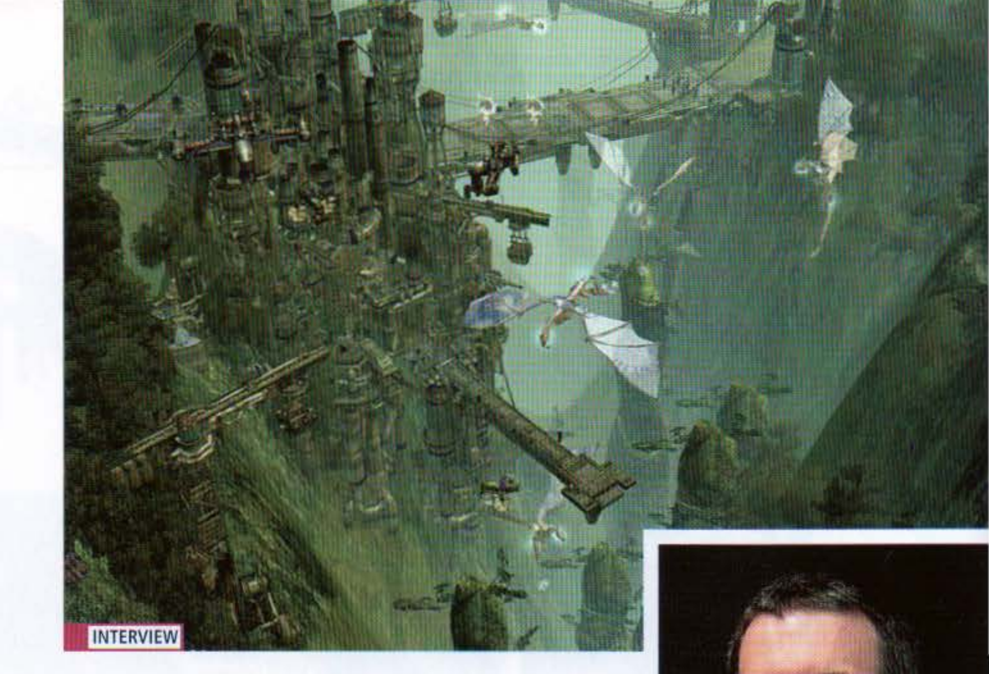


EA heads east

Consolidating the region as a development hotbed, Electronic Arts has announced the establishment of a studio in Singapore, following in the footsteps of both LucasArts and Koei. EA Singapore will manage Asian localisation tasks for the most part of its formative months, but plans exist for it to then branch out into developing for the territory's ever-popular online gaming market. Currently staffed by 20 developers brought in from Japan, Korea, Holland, Taiwan and local studios, the new facility will be overseen by EA vice president Chris Thompson, with vice president of Asian operations Irene Chua taking on the role of studio manager. The market for games in Singapore has grown rapidly in recent years, with Koei's studio – announced back in February – being that company's first outside of Japan.

The Edge Top 100

Production of **Edge**'s one-off special dedicated to the best 100 videogames of all time – as voted for by you, us and the industry – continues apace. Response has been incredible, but there's still time to get involved – until January 16, in fact. Simply pick the ten games you feel are the greatest ever produced (importantly, they must stand up to scrutiny today) and send the list in an email entitled 'Top 100' to edge@futurenet.co.uk (you may also include brief justifications for your choices; we will be printing selected examples).



INTERVIEW

A legend in his own realtime

Brian Reynolds explains the perils of pitting aristocratic steampunk against desert magic

After working with Sid Meier at Microprose, designer **Brian Reynolds** (above right) co-founded Firaxis, Meier's post-Microprose studio, where his continued collaborations produced *Civilization II* and *Alpha Centauri*. Leaving Firaxis in 2000 to start his own Big Huge Games, Reynolds transposed his turn-based design skills to realtime with *Rise Of Nations*. We caught up with him to talk about his latest project, *Rise Of Legends*, as he attempts to conquer that most uncharted of territories: fantasy.

It seems you've picked up a habit of creating real-world strategy games, then following them with fiction-based spiritual successors.

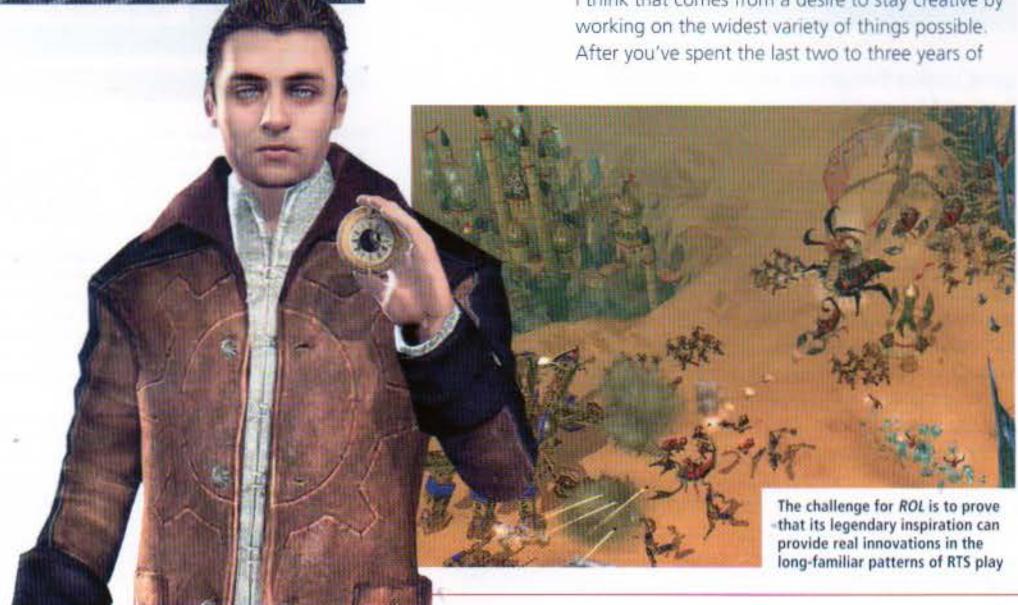
I think that comes from a desire to stay creative by working on the widest variety of things possible. After you've spent the last two to three years of your life on a big title, at the end of it often working 60 hours a week, the idea of getting right back on the exact same horse can be pretty daunting. But if the topic is fresh, that makes it much more exciting, and you're building up lots of creativity in the background for going back to the previous topic – after *Alpha Centauri*, I was very excited to do another history game. And letting successful titles lie fallow for a while before making a sequel leads to a much better sequel.

There's a sense that many of the leading PC genres are stuck in a rut of either realism or very limited sci-fi or fantasy designs. Has the PC market become more resistant to experimental themes?

Gee, I don't know... The so-called 'rut' of realism is where I've made some of my best games, and also had some of the most fun as a gamer, so I'm not sure how that's a rut – unless you're someone who just doesn't like history games. I guess I can see that we might have enough 'orcs and elves' franchises in the world at this point, which is certainly why we've tried to go in a different direction.

You chose *ROL*'s theme to inspire new concepts in its development, but do you think it can also inspire new audiences outside of the RTS faithful?

It's very much our aim. There's depth for the hardcore RTS fans, but we've also spent considerable effort streamlining the experience for new players – so you can choose to experience the game as a great-looking world with a cool story, or as a deep and strategic RTS – which has great graphics. One of my continuing personal interests



The challenge for *ROL* is to prove that its legendary inspiration can provide real innovations in the long-familiar patterns of RTS play



Rise Of Legends' decision to combine magic and technology means the skies can be dramatically filled with both gossamer-winged dragons and only slightly less fantastical airships



turns out to be interfaces, so finding an interface that is accessible to new players, but delivers the goods for the hardcore, is an area I've personally been really focused on.

ROL's two revealed nations were inspired by earlier standalone game concepts – what effect has hybridising two games' worth of material into one had on development?
Ah, but see, we cleverly hybridised two *half* games' worth of material! The whole problem with the let's-do-a-game-about-the-Arabian-Nights idea is that when we researched it, we didn't find enough material to build an epic RTS around – likewise the idea of doing a Renaissance-based game with a heavy Da Vinci emphasis. But both made for excellent nation concepts in a fantasy game. Then we're throwing in a third 'half' just for good measure, but I can't talk about that yet.

Despite _Alpha Centauri_'s setting, it had more tangible humanity – and social commentary – than many Earth-bound titles. Does _ROL_ have scope for that connection, or is it intentionally more about spectacle?

"I've learned that the complexities of history work great in a history game, but don't always translate well to fiction, because they no longer play off our existing knowledge"

I think it was actually *because* of the setting that *AC* was able to do it – serious science fiction is mostly about looking into the speculative future as a reflection on the present, so I don't think I'd have been doing a good job as a science-fiction game designer if we hadn't included that. In contrast, I don't think the fantasy genre is a primary vehicle for social commentary, although it can be. Both genres place great emphasis on the world and settings – and you've already seen the work we've put into the setting – but the priority in fantasy is having compelling characters, and we've done a lot of work there.

But you've stripped some of _RON_'s social strategy elements such as government, or cultural and diplomatic victories. Do you feel it's more difficult to identify on a cultural level with fantasy creations?
I've learned from experience that the complexities of history work great in a history game, but don't always translate well to fiction, because they no longer play off our existing knowledge. So we've removed some of the elements that seemed more history-specific, and replaced them with things that play to a fantasy world's strengths: heroes, global magic, and radically different nations, units and technologies.

Do you think a pacifist RTS is possible, or are the tank rushes and nukes an inexorable part of gameplay – or, perhaps, human nature?
Well, there's always the 'thin veneer' method, in which you use a subject matter like little cartoon bunnies that don't shoot or get killed – they're just being 'sent away'. It's still unmistakably an RTS, and if it was appealing and creatively treated the game could be successful. Another approach is sort of what we did with the 'tech race' game style in *RON*, where you essentially have a competitive RTS economy, and some indirect jockeying about for territory, but no actual fighting – even of the disguised variety. I think what you end up with here is only half an RTS – I did enjoy playing tech races in *RON*, but there's definitely the feeling that something is missing.

So I'm not sure if tank rushes are human nature… but I think they are, at least metaphorically, an inexorable part of RTS games: it's the direct competition, of building something then measuring it in mortal combat against what someone else built, that defines the genre.

As both a designer and programmer, is it difficult for you to choose sides between magic and technology?
[Laughs.] As both a designer and a programmer I of course know that the true answer lies in balance. Ssshhh!





INTERVIEW

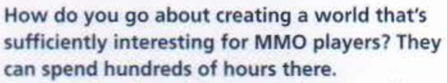
The Ring of fire

Nevrax wants to thaw the frozen world of the MMO, and with its new expansion Ryzom Ring, players can stoke the flames



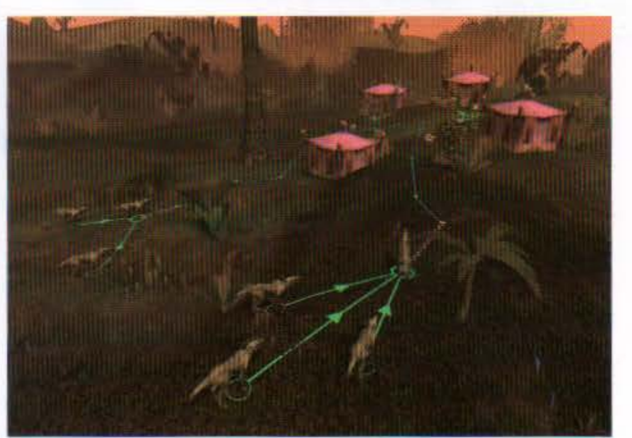
The ringleaders of *Saga Of Ryzom* at their Paris HQ (from left to right: David Cohen Corval, Daniel Miller and Jessica Mulligan)

The September 2004 release of French studio Nevrax's only game – the unusual and wildly ambitious MMORPG *Saga Of Ryzom* – couldn't have been more of a baptism of fire. An avowedly unimpressive beta and delays caused by a very late decision to self-publish and the destruction of its entire US shipment in a hurricane, among other things, prevented it reaching as many players as Nevrax needed. But the idealistic indie still radiates enthusiasm for its pocket universe: an episodic, epic narrative set in a changing world that responds to players' actions. We spoke to its French founder, CEO and creative director **David Cohen Corval**, longtime English CTO and producer **Daniel Miller** and American producer **Jessica Mulligan** (a more recent arrival at Nevrax, but a veteran of 20 years in the online gaming industry) about the perils and peculiarities of MMO development, and the forthcoming, free, and even more daring expansion *The Ryzom Ring*: the first ever open content editor in the MMO field.

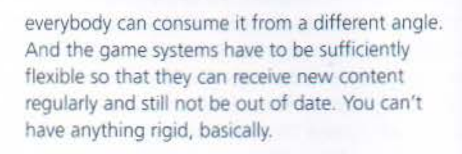


How do you go about creating a world that's sufficiently interesting for MMO players? They can spend hundreds of hours there.

David Cohen Corval: Yeah, and they share things, so they burn it fast as well. You have to look at it like a tornado. There is the eye, and that eye has to be able to move, so that would be the focus, the core action. But then around it, spinning out from it, you have entire strings of subgame experience… other flavours derived from that same knot. So everyone can relate to the same action, but



Another feature being introduced to *Ryzom* is the Outposts, where factions fight for control of territory and raw materials. Command of NPC squads is an important factor



everybody can consume it from a different angle. And the game systems have to be sufficiently flexible so that they can receive new content regularly and still not be out of date. You can't have anything rigid, basically.

Do you think episodic content has a future in gaming outside of MMOs?

DCC: Episodes are good because you have a progression, an evolution… The way we conceive the evolution of the game is very similar to that of a sitcom. There's no reason why we shouldn't get inspired by such things. There is a macro-story, sub-stories, and the players decide where they want to get involved. Can it work for other types of games? I just don't know. It would require a hell of a lot of development resources for one shop to be able to release episode after episode, on time, regularly, with new content. The good thing about MMORPGs is that players together create a lot of their own entertainment.

To what extent do you have to listen to the demands and complaints of players?

Jessica Mulligan: You have to listen to them. You don't necessarily have to do what they want. We talk to our players a lot, any time we're thinking of doing a big new feature. But you can't be afraid to say: 'No, I'm not gonna do that, and here's why'. The important part is the 'here's why'.

You don't have enough players at the moment – is *The Ryzom Ring* an attempt to fix that?

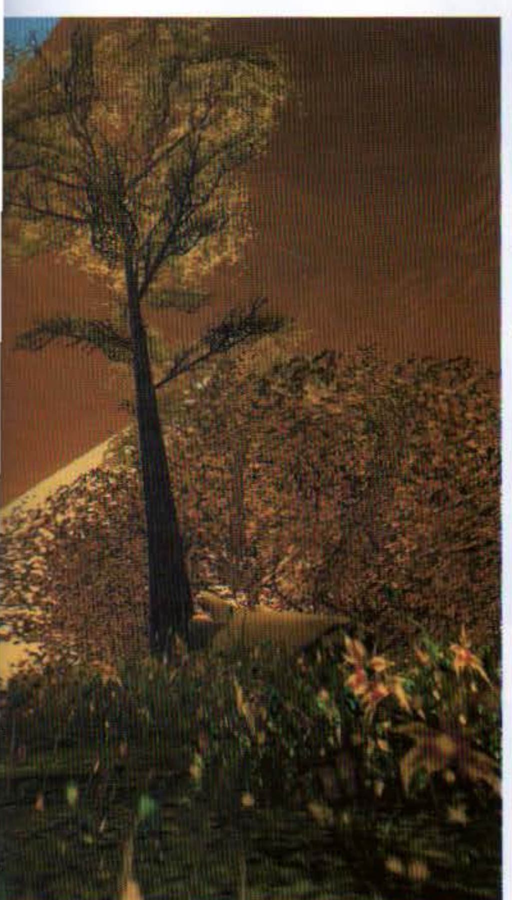
DCC: One of the *Ring*'s missions is definitely to appeal to new players who find themselves trapped in something which resembles a theme park more

Newswire



Art initiates strife

Sony's latest plea to the US urban market not only failed to convince with its faux-underground spirit, but trod on some toes in the process. The murals – apparently self-defeating representations of young PSP owners as mindless drones – were sprayed on to several San Francisco buildings once the owners' permission had been sought. But no sooner had the company been identified as the source than local graffiti artists took offence (as can be seen at www.robgreenleaf.com), believing the adverts to be a cynical attempt to buy their credibility. Most were then defaced prior to being removed, with anticorporate slogans and verse daubed alongside to drive home the counter-culture's message. Sony's campaign followed in the wake of similar efforts by Microsoft and IBM.





The Pioneer programme will allow some *Ring* users to actually open their scenarios and spaces to any player in the world, not just invitees. Respect for other players and for the consistency of the greater *Ryzom* universe will have to be shown, however



than a true living world. We want to give them the ability to express themselves.

Daniel Miller: The concept of *The Ryzom Ring* itself dates back a long way. This is a direction that we've always wanted to go in... getting back to pen-and-paper RPGs, being a dungeon master.

How do you sell these concepts to someone who isn't interested in hardcore roleplaying?

DM: I have a great quote that Jessica said to me: 'Why have a house when you can have a ranch?' You can have a space, a home, which is your own. If you have a second life, an avatar, a virtual existence in a world, you should have your own space in which you have an enormous amount of flexibility to set it up and run it as you like. For players who are not interested in DMing – I think that will be the majority – they will find that there is a richness of experience, of possibilities.

JM: I actually think the *Ring* tools make it the next stage of the evolution of MMOs. We'll be the first to grant this level of control to players in terms of content or flexibility. I think it also makes it necessary for other games to start looking at what we're doing and follow suit.

You're interested in taking *Ryzom* into China – how does a western MMO go about cracking that market?

JM: Well, you've got regulatory issues because the Chinese government is pretty hands-on, which means you need a trustworthy partner. It's the Wild West over there right now. There are quick-buck artists, but there are also some companies that have been around three, four or five years, like Netease, and they're now multibillion-dollar corporations just like that. From scratch, from nothing. The difficulty is finding the right partner, and understanding what features the Chinese market needs that the western market doesn't need, to make sure you're filling those needs.

What has the impact of *World Of Warcraft* been on *Ryzom*, and the MMO whole market?

DCC: It was like a storm covering the sky, and you don't have any more sun [laughs].

JM: I'm not dissing Blizzard when I say that there's not much new in that game. What they have done is learn from the mistakes everybody else made, and not make as many. I don't care if they get 20 million subscriptions, I really don't, because I think they're opening up the market. The funny thing about it is, it's not even the largest game in the world. There are at least three games in China that are larger: Netease's *Fantasy Westward Journey* has 800,000 simultaneous users in China alone. They've got about six million registered users, the last time I looked. They launched at the exact same time as *WOW* and they're just killing it. But you hear about 22 million MMO players in China and think, 'Big deal'. But four million players with an American company? The west can understand that. I understand four million times $15 times 12. I understand some people are getting rich. Now I'm interested.

"I think the Ring tools make it the next stage of the evolution of MMOs. We'll be the first to grant this level of control to players in terms of content or flexibility"

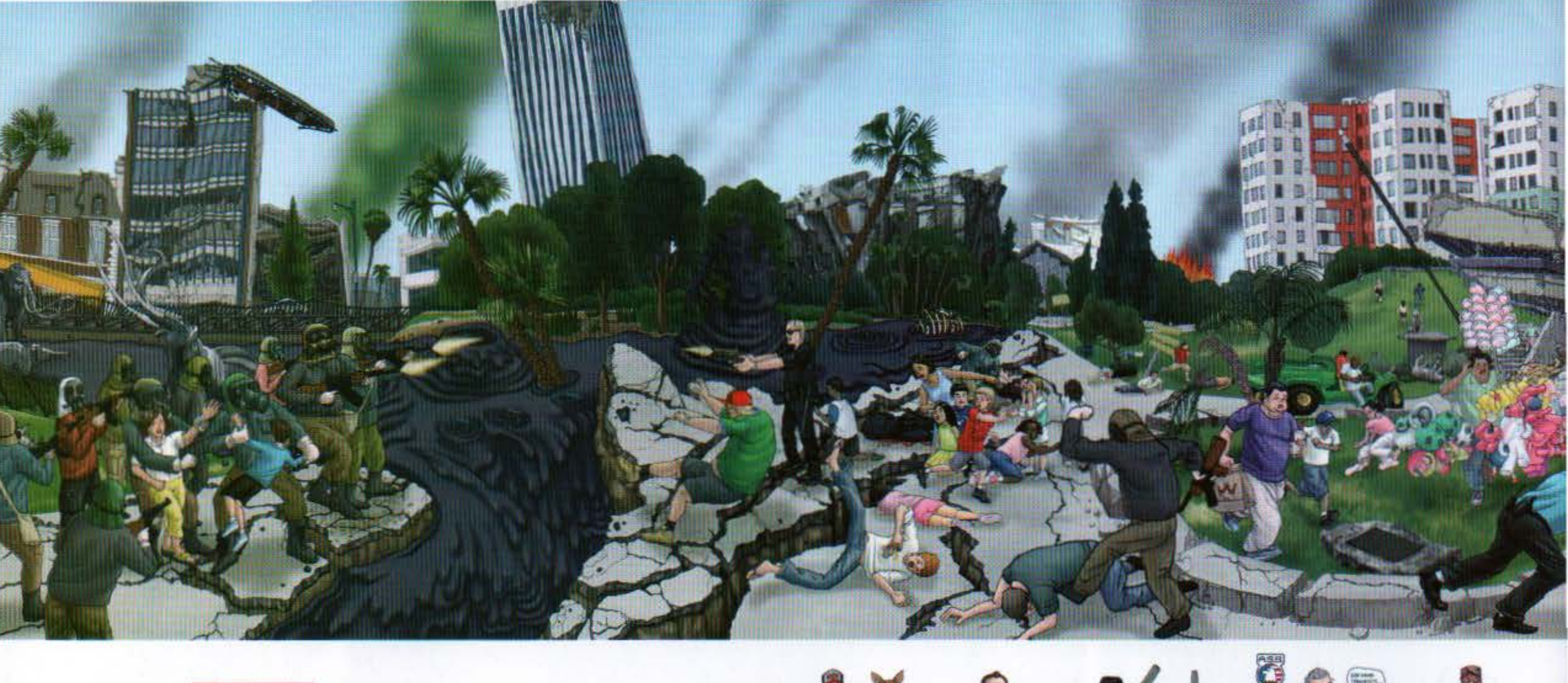
OUT THERE



THREE POINTS TO MIDNIGHT

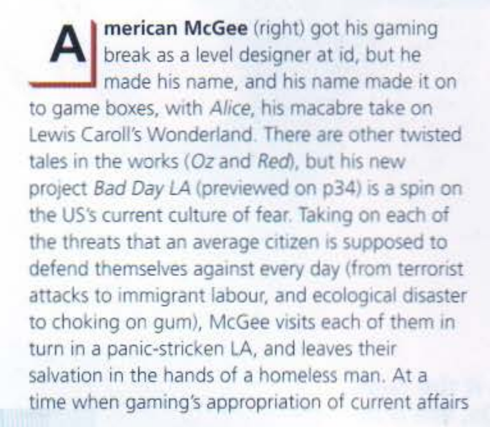
What better way to mark the 33rd anniversary of Atari's *Pong*, the grandfather of the modern arcade, than with this handsome designer clock? Assembled by Dutch design group Buro Vormkrijgers, the two autonomous paddles mark off the time by scoring against each other every hour and minute, respectively. Though originally designed as a personal project, the group intends to start a small commercial run in January. To explain the rather bizarre scorekeeping necessary to sync the game with the time, the group has put forward this rationale: "The left player finally scores, he sucks at playing *Pong* compared to the right player. Because of his lack of talent we reward his point by erasing the right player's score. You know what? After that he still sucks at playing *Pong*."

• burovormkrijgers.nl/docs/pong.html



INTERVIEW

LA nightmares



Why the end of the world was a dream come true for American McGee

American McGee (right) got his gaming break as a level designer at id, but he made his name, and his name made it on to game boxes, with *Alice*, his macabre take on Lewis Caroll's Wonderland. There are other twisted tales in the works (*Oz* and *Red*), but his new project *Bad Day LA* (previewed on p34) is a spin on the US's current culture of fear. Taking on each of the threats that an average citizen is supposed to defend themselves against every day (from terrorist attacks to immigrant labour, and ecological disaster to choking on gum), McGee visits each of them in turn in a panic-stricken LA, and leaves their salvation in the hands of a homeless man. At a time when gaming's appropriation of current affairs has become increasingly toothless and exploitative, we talk to him about gaming's potential for satire.

"At any moment a meteor large enough to annihilate most creatures on the planet could hit us and we'd have no warning, no way to prepare"



Bad Day LA is certain to antagonise conservative critics of videogames who don't look beyond the screenshots to assess the tone or intention of the game (or the story) that they represent

***Bad Day LA* is rare in being a game with a political edge. Do you think that's because of over-conservative publishers, or do you think that most developers don't believe that games are able to tackle those kinds of issues?**

I think that the traditional videogame-model game doesn't easily support more 'advanced' narrative content. To borrow from my friend Mark Meadows' explanation, games are following in the footsteps of literary development over the past thousand years. Currently we're moving from epic-style games (lone hero against the world) towards more complicated narrative structures. As that happens I think we'll start to see games which contain more true emotion and more diverse themes.

When *Bad Day LA* was in its planning stages, did you discuss what would happen if – as it actually did – the events it satirised played out for real?

Disaster events are constantly taking place. They have been and always will be a part of life on this planet. At any moment a meteor large enough to annihilate most creatures on the planet could hit us and we'd have no warning, no way to prepare. Yellowstone National Park could erupt, as it has done in the past, and not only kill every living thing within 100 miles, but send the planet into a minor ice age. A volcano in Columbia is forcing mass evacuations. Aftershocks from the recent earthquake in Afghanistan have displaced hundreds of thousands of refugees. And so on and so on.

One of the major points made in *Bad Day LA* is



that life goes on as life can. We should expect the unexpected and be prepared to react appropriately, but we should not allow our lives to be determined by fear of the unknown or not yet materialised.

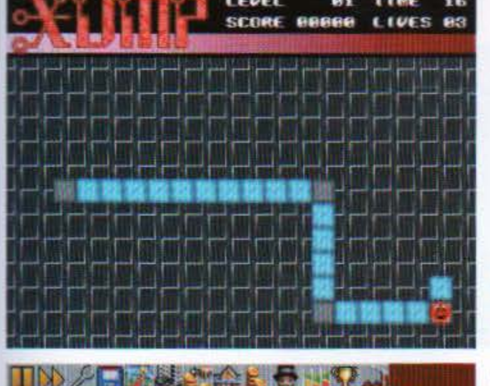
Sure, there are concerns that real-world events could have an impact on the game we're trying to make, but at the same time, I could get hit by a bus on the way into work. I don't allow that possibility to deter me from leaving the house.

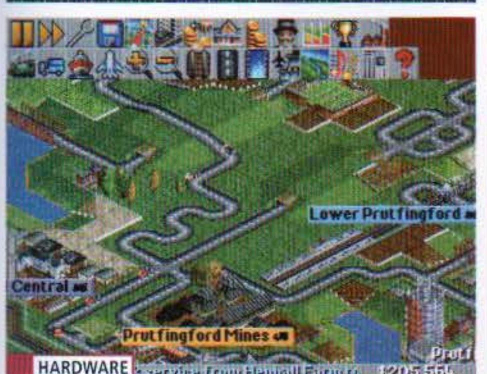
For someone with political or social points to make, what do you think videogames offer compared to trying to present similar ideas through a documentary or a piece of static art?

Recently, I've played firstperson action games based on real-world events such as World War II that are so realistic, so intense, that they are difficult to endure for extended periods of time. Like films, games offer us the ability to think about what we might do or feel in extreme situations. But games also go beyond, allowing the user to not only witness but to act. As a communication and teaching tool I think games are second only to reality in their ability to convey experience.









Of the few homebrew efforts currently available for download, highlights include a playable version of *Transport Tycoon Deluxe*, as well as the inevitable ports of *Hexen* and *Duke Nukem 3D*. Of all its community works in progress, however, a PlayStation emulator is by far and away the most notable



Handheld homebrewed

GP2X opens the door for indie handheld developers, but will it be able to prove itself a gamer's gaming device?

The first concern of any GP2X owner will be the issues that homebrew code can never address: those of the hardware itself. Gamepark has keenly stressed that its machine is entering a different market to PSP or DS (and not the weekly vegetable market that Gizmondo might soon be fighting for), but that doesn't excuse some of the poor design decisions revealed at first contact.

Opting to use a single analogue stick rather than a combination of that and D-pad, GP2X doesn't make navigation of its systems particularly pleasant – the stick being stiff to move past its dead zone and spongy at a push. A standard diamond formation of face buttons sits to the right of its quite average TFT screen, so closely grouped that you could easily press all four at once with a thumb. The shoulder buttons, at least, are both resilient and compliant to gentle pressure.

Such matters pale, however, when the question arises as to what possessed Gamepark to manufacture a high-drain handheld reliant on two AA batteries for power. The company claims this enhances the GP2X's consumer-friendliness; we have to disagree. Admittedly, early reports of a meagre 30 minutes of battery life weren't upheld by our own tests, but having to step reluctantly back into that world of disposable power sources leaves a discouraging impression.

However, our GP2X test unit was a first edition model (a fact prominently displayed on its chassis), leaving room for improvement. Designed more for developers than consumers, it boasts basic USB connectivity and file management, but nothing to make navigation a pleasant experience. Its prototype firmware meant that the Linux frontend left plenty to be desired, with video support limited and most menu options leading to differently coloured file browsers with otherwise identical functionality. But the development of this environment into something more appealing is surely just a matter of time, and the minor physical issues may yet be ironed out.

Key to the machine's consumer accessibility is its upgradeable firmware. While the function of PSP updates is to lock its systems down, GP2X follows a contrary creed. Once Gamepark itself provides the initial push with a first proper build, the machine's firmware will, like its apps, become the responsibility of the homebrew community. The philosophy, it seems, is that if the software you want to see doesn't one day appear on the machine, you have no one to blame but yourself – or the sleepless bedroom coder you bombarded with forum posts the night before.

> **The philosophy, it seems, is that if the software you want to see doesn't one day appear on the machine, you have no one to blame but yourself**

Though no officially developed software seems to exist as yet, the residents of several hobbyist development groups have already embarked on inevitable emulator projects along with game adaptations and conversions. The first two *Quake*s are both available as frankly unplayable tests, while more solid ports of *Hexen* and *Transport Tycoon Deluxe* have recently joined them. The most capable emulators at present are for less-demanding systems such as C64 and NES, though more ambitious projects have the likes of the Neo-Geo CD and PlayStation in their sights.

Power points

What it lacks in exterior design, GP2X makes up for with power

- **Price:** £125
- **Distributor:** www.gbax.com
- **CPU:** Twin cores: ARM920T host processor and ARM940T video coprocessor
- **RAM:** 64Mb
- **Storage:** 64Mb NAND Flash, SD Card
- **Connectivity:** USB 2.0, TV-out (unavailable for test)
- **OS:** Linux-based
- **Display:** 3.5inch TFT LCD @ 320x240 (QVGA)
- **Video support:** MPEG, MPEG4, DivX, XviD, WMV
- **Audio support:** MP3, OGG, WMA
- **Image support:** JPG, BMP, PCX, GIF, Ebook

OUT THERE



THE SOFTWARE SLUMP

Though the forms may be abstracted, there's an air of familiarity to that signature slouch. Students enrolled in the Royal College of Art's industrial design program have created a series of concept furniture forms, modeled after the body shapes of engrossed PSP players.

The series is meant to invoke the idea of the device as both a public and private experience, inspired by the group's observation of a gaming get-together – a metaphorical observation on how the PSP can "encourage shared experience but require a degree of isolation and immersion, and that proximity is as much a factor as mobility" – and is presumably not at all a stinging commentary on our poor posture.

● www.irvinebrown.com/psprca/about_project.htm





New Zealand-born PSP title *GripShift* took Best Game Design, Best Level and Best Handheld Title awards



Two separate talks from Blizzard were offered: Chris Metzen's 'Crafting an MMORPG from the top down' and Rob Pardo's 'Climbing mountains – what it takes to create a AAA title'

Out to play at the Oz fest

Among its workshops and cocktail parties, the 2005 Australian Game Developers Conference attracted some star speakers from the worldwide creative community

A healthy number of familiar, prominent faces appeared among the 1,000-strong attendance of the 2005 AGDC, to discuss some increasingly familiar but increasingly prominent themes. Staged at the AMCI Cinemas and BMW Edge within Melbourne's Federation Square over the first three days of December, the conference actually began some time before its opening keynote speech from Eidos' Ian Livingstone. A school-focused games summit took place on November 30, a praiseworthy event with the strapline 'Most school students play video games – most teachers do not', setting an agenda of making learning establishments comfortable with games, and helping their communities to understand the potential of their power.

With Livingstone's session – 'Life is a game' – over, a volley of presentations were kicked off, a number of which covered the increasingly vital topic of brand expansion. These included 'Extending the game to the web' from Bungie's Aaron Lieberman and the self-explanatory 'Application of Ty [the Tasmanian Tiger] from game to TV animation series' from Krome's Robert Walsh. Each day of the AGDC was interspersed with a range of traditional social bashes too, including the brief Women In Games Luncheon, a range of cocktail parties and a gala awards dinner.

Pandemic Studios and BioWare proffered keynotes that bookended the events of day two, pitched around a similar theme of weathering the financial climate of the industry. And Jeff Pobst of Microsoft hosted two separate sessions, one on XNA, providing an update on Microsoft's ambitious development toolset (and no, Sony and Nintendo haven't signed up yet).

Continue

Respawning enemies
If you're Live Arcade's Geometry Wars: RE

New 360s for sale
If you're a proper shop with proper prices

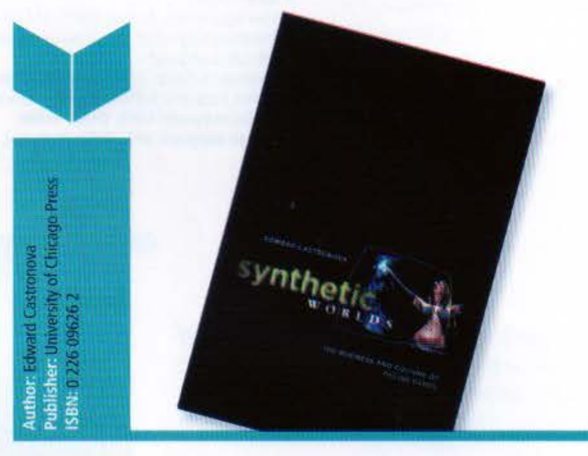
Christmas music
If you're the delectable Nights soundtrack

Quit

Christmas music
If you're anything off of some kind of compilation

New 360s for sale
If you're an eBay profiteer or bundle-merchant

Respawning enemies
If you're anything else. It's time for a new tactic



Author: Edward Castronova
Publisher: University of Chicago Press
ISBN: 0 226 09626 2

SYNTHETIC WORLDS

The first economist of MMOGs continues to highlight the interactions between game life and real life

By his own admission, Edward Castronova is a great example of being at the right place at the right time. Back in 2002 he wrote a research paper on the economics of online games. Never formally published, it nevertheless quickly became one of the most downloaded papers on the research database where it was released and sparked a wide-ranging debate about the real-world implications of such entertainment.

Synthetic Worlds is Castronova's follow-up. Like his original research, there's an element of discontinuity about the whole enterprise. To some degree, it's not his fault: the juxtaposition of games and reality has often confused both sides. For example, his original research stated that if the play time of the players of *EverQuest* was monetised at the exchange rate of in-game currency to the dollar as found on eBay, it would rank the nation of *EverQuest* higher than Egypt and China. The fact that this was an economic exercise, and hence the theoretical output of 200,000 twentysomething Americans wasn't anywhere near the wealth of some of the most populous countries on Earth, somehow seemed to get lost.

And there's a similar feeling throughout the book, as Castronova offers an entry-level course into online games. Frankly it's hard work, and while there are some economic gems concerning possible approaches to in-game pricing structure and inflation, too many chapters are spent lost in seeming amazement that virtuality can impact reality.



Author: Bruce Sterling
Publisher: MIT Press
ISBN: 0 262 69326 7

SHAPING THINGS

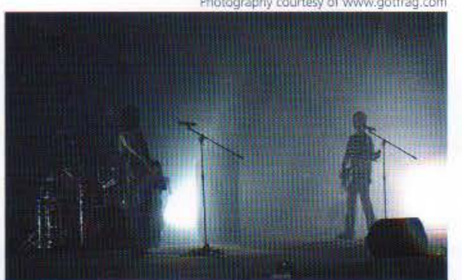
The future of objects predicted as information flow meets sustainability

One of the most intelligent commentators on the shape of the world being built by our technologies, Bruce Sterling's contribution to MIT Press' Mediawork series is all about the power of things. Starting with artifacts – the hand-crafted objects produced when people were hunters and farmers – Sterling argues the world has moved on, through the ages of the machine and the product. Currently, it's the era of the gizmo; consumers are end-users of highly unstable, often programmable objects that lock them into an infrastructure of information overload. But help is at hand, he suggests, thanks to the spime. Ecologically neutral, uniquely identifiable and eminently data-mineable, spimes mark the ultimate synergy between information flows and physical sustainability.

Not yet fully realised, the best example of spime-like objects to date are things such as books that are only printed when we order them. According to Sterling, though, this sort of just-in-time creation is only part of the concept. For the spime world is one where all product information, from the sourcing of raw materials to the design, manufacture, shipping, useage and decommissioning processes are tracked, and more importantly made the responsibility of the owner or user. Sterling prefers the term wrangler, which he bulks up to encompass a community of experts. And, worries such as civil liberties aside, he makes a convincing case that in the over-developed world at least, spimeness is to be welcomed.

Photography courtesy of www.gotfrag.com





ESports takes aim at MTV

Will colossal cash prizes, extravagant ceremonies and television support give gaming its much-sought-after mainstream appeal?



al1ty's fame

biggest pro-gamer on circuit just gets bigger

tice, practice, practice' is tto synonymous in the petitive gaming circuit with than 'Fatal1ty' Wendel. The time world champion is wned for his eight-to-12-hour y practice sessions. Over the five years, Fatal1ty has ned over 40 tournament ries and now receives uent media interest from the of CNN, Time magazine and Now what began as a range ega-sized Fatal1ty-branded se mats has become an nsive brand portfolio used arily by ABIT to promote its d and graphics cards.

ose who know each play inside out, acting can be nearly as absorbing tivity as actually participating

This year marked a decade of competitive eSports competitions and culminated with its two largest ever events. From November 16-20, 800 gamers from 67 countries were flown into Singapore to compete in the annual World Cyber Games tournament, which offered $300,000 (£173,500) in cash prizes across nine game disciplines. The following week in Times Square, New York, the world's greatest duellers battled for $500,000 (£289,000) in the concluding stop of the ten-leg Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) world tour.

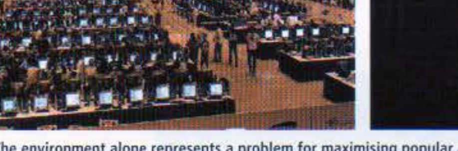
The fifth annual Olympics-styled World Cyber Games festival was the largest to date and featured its usual array of ceremonies, live stage matches and an ever-increasing prize purse. An intense week of action witnessed Team USA taking home the 'best country' trophy with gold medals in *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Halo 2*, and a silver medal in *WarCraft 3: The Frozen Throne*.

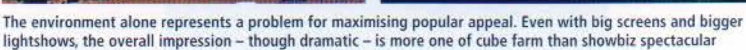
However, despite such large cash prizes and festivities, the World Cyber Games approach still limits its audience to its hardcore gaming following. In nations outside of south-east Asia the appeal and exposure is far more limited, and while ICM (organiser of the World Cyber Games) can never be accused of 'dumbing down' its events in order to appeal to a broader market, it is the same approach that will ensure the World Cyber Games event grows steadily without ever exploding into the Olympian event it tries to be.

The CPL approach changed radically for 2005: in response to increasing competition from other

Produced, filmed and aired by MTV, the New York stop of the world tour fused a CPL final programme appealing to both casual viewers and diehard tournament followers







The environment alone represents a problem for maximising popular appeal. Even with big screens and bigger lightshows, the overall impression – though dramatic – is more one of cube farm than showbiz spectacular

tournament organisers the World Tour finals was a unique event. Produced, filmed and aired by MTV, the New York stop of the world tour fused a CPL final programme appealing to both casual viewers and diehard tournament followers. Despite heavy MTV involvement, mainstay eSports commentary team TSN (Team Sportscast Network) was brought onboard to host the event.

The two clear favourites for the event were Dutchman Sander 'Vo0' Kaasjager and four-time CPL World Champion Jonathan 'Fatal1ty' Wendel. Following his victory in the upper bracket final, Vo0 needed to win just one of the best-of-three *Painkiller* encounters to take the $150,000 (£86,500) prize. Fatal1ty therefore needed two straight victories and won the first two maps setting up a final match between possibly the greatest rivals in eSports' history. Fatal1ty held his nerve for the final map, leaving Vo0 with the $100,000 (£57,500) runner-up prize and the $20,000 (£11,500) Most Valuable Player award in light of his top place on the leaderboard. While Fatal1ty was crowned the tournament champion, at $231,000 (£133,500) his earnings from the event were just short of that of Vo0, who walked away with $232,000 (£134,000).

Without doubt, the eSports phenomenon is growing and spectator numbers are increasing every year. However, these attendees remain eSports enthusiasts, and the true test of both the CPL and WCG will be to gain frequent mainstream media interest. Although the events themselves are becoming established fixtures, turning their players into household names will be the real test. After all, who wants to hear about UEFA rather than Rooney?



INCOMING

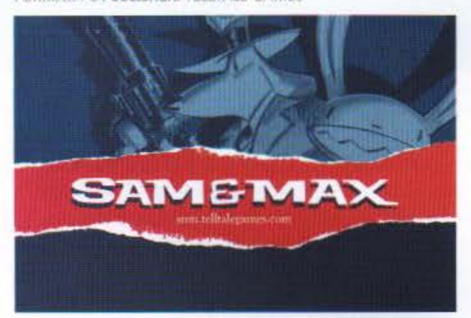
New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Virtua Fighter 5
FORMAT: COIN-OP **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



The yawning chasm of productivity draws nearer, an early version already wowing series fans in Japanese arcades with its visual and strategic overhaul, customisation modes and online replays

Sam & Max
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** TELLTALE GAMES



Telltale has a website, something approaching a title and, most importantly, Steve Purcell lined up for the comeback we feared would never happen. But was *Bone* really that good an omen?

Rule Of Rose
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SONY



Largely overlooked when its first trailer played to E3 crowds, SCEJ's survival horror packs into its perverse CG plenty of child torture, though quite who's torturing who is difficult to ascertain

Ibara
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** TAITO



From *Battle Bakraid* and *Battle Garegga* creator Shinobu Yagawa comes a PS2 port of Cave's typically frenetic arcade shooter. How will the visual translation compare to that of *Mushihimesama*?

Neverwinter Nights 2
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** OBSIDIAN



Little has been seen of singleplayer, but Obsidian has been keenly demonstrating a new graphics engine together with a suite of associated special effects. An upgraded level builder also features

Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** FUNCOM



Mouse-driven direct combat and innovative rubber-banding to keep horsemen together are just a couple of the promising quirks Funcom is bringing to its ambitious and authentically harsh MMO

Crackdown
FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** REALTIME WORLDS



Though its art style is largely characterised by bold outlines and gradient fills, this seamless-world actioner from *Lemmings* and *GTA* creator David Jones still has potential to stand itself apart

Smackdown Vs Raw 2006
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** THQ

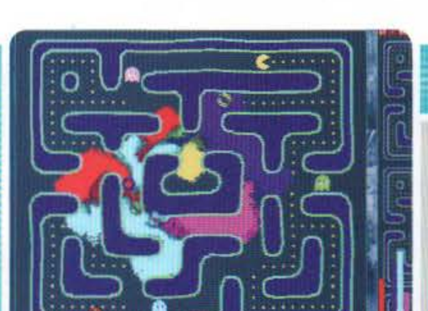


Its first new (albeit merely downsized) format since the opening instalment back in 2000 is treated to an adaptation of, reportedly, the series' best since *No Mercy*. Should we be 'doing' wrestling?

Burnout Revenge
FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** EA



Persistent tracking of rivalries via Xbox Live, save and share functionality for replays and, if the latest screens are to be believed, a paint stripping visual makeover are the 360 upgrades



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Liquid War

www.ufoot.org/liquidwar

At a time when next-gen developers are chasing dreams of thousands of onscreen characters, *Liquid War* has for years been leading equally massive armies through trenches and into epic struggle, albeit on a much tinier scale.

The object of *Liquid War* is simple and immediately accessible: by moving your cursor through the twisted tunnels of the game's many maps, a fluid mass of pixels follows your lead and into liquid battles against opposing colours (either CPU or player controlled, both online or off), creating a painter's palette disaster of hues all consuming and pushing their way through each other on multiple fronts until only a single colour remains. The result is low-key and meditative strategy, even somewhat oddly dramatic, as heroic red pixels slog through yellow in a ferocious patch of green.

A visit to the game's website also reveals 'The Battle Of Emberlificoted', surely the most unlikely game-related fanfic the internet has yet produced.

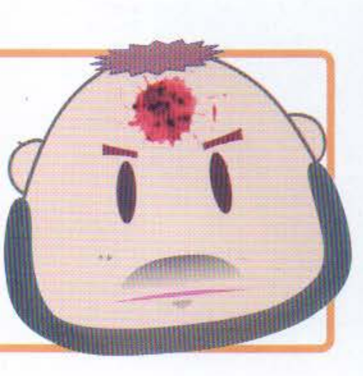




SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Videogames in the dock

Game producer Brick Bardo on calling it quits, and the trouble with games



Well, guess what? I quit my job. Yes, I finally took the decision to leave the company – one of Japan's biggest game developers/ publishers. In my previous column I wrote about the increasing number of people leaving the games industry in Japan. It's bizarre to continue with this one, talking of me quitting too.

When did I join the company? I think it was just before *Final Fantasy VII* was released on the PlayStation – the beginning of the PlayStation era, in other words. (I also remember this being the time when a PC game called *Postal* appeared. We'll return to its theme.) My decision to leave the company after such a long time is a personal one, of course, but, having said that, it's true that many things have changed in the industry during these years. One thing, in particular, has really troubled me lately. I spoke about it previously: the age rating system on games. It's something that is becoming stricter in Japan.

When I joined the games industry, around ten years ago, the rating issue was not that important in Japan. To be honest, there was no issue at all. Of course, console manufacturers like Sony or Nintendo had their own policies and rules, but these rules couldn't really make life difficult for game developers, not like they can now.

Graphics have improved by such a margin in recent years that game content seems to be targeting an older audience more and more often, with more realism, more mature content, simply more adult-oriented games. But that's not all: society is getting more violent. We are seeing behaviour we've never seen before. Once, here in Japan, we knew an almost peaceful existence. Now, crime is affecting everyone. Society is changing for the worse. We see a young man killing his parents or his brother because he was angry. Youngsters are moving around in gangs and not hesitating to assault people. We hear of adults engaging in indecent behaviour towards young girls. And so on.

These aren't new crimes. However, in the past we saw them being committed by adults, and now the criminals are getting younger and younger. And because some of these people played *Grand Theft Auto*, were fans of *Biohazard* or mostly played erotic games, the entire game industry gets the blame, and its image suffers: 'It is because of the videogames', people say. The media and others are citing the videogame industry as the main reason behind these social changes. It has become a scapegoat, and this is a serious problem.

Society is getting more violent. We are seeing behaviour we've never seen before. Once, here in Japan, we knew an almost peaceful existence. Now, crime is affecting everyone. We see young men killing members of their family

'He or she does not understand the importance of life because he or she plays with videogames', they say. But isn't the teaching of values one of the tasks that parents have in terms of educating their children? Of course there are games that should not be played by young children, but does that mean that all games have a bad influence on those who play them?

Because kids are not taught the difference between the real and the virtual worlds, in Japan we see some stupid young people who think: 'If I die, I can resurrect'. If this were a part of religious teachings, fair enough, but here in Japan we do not have religion as such; people have no ties in it



Though game violence is often thought of as a western issue, it's also big in Japan. *Ryu Ga Gotoku* (above left), from Toshihiro Nagoshi's studio at Sega, has raised eyebrows with its strong yakuza themes

Capcom's *Resident Evil* (*Biohazard*) series, whose depictions of gory scenarios have only become more sophisticated, has been singled out as a bad influence on Japanese youth

Even in Japan, *GTA: San Andreas* (left) hasn't been able to escape controversy. It'll be interesting to see how Nintendo's new Revolution controller (above) impacts on the perception of videogame violence

– most Japanese people celebrate the New Year at a Shinto shrine, marry at a Christian church, enjoy Christmas with a cake and die to be buried in a Buddhist temple. So parents and schools have a huge responsibility for young people. But are they doing their jobs?

The next generation of videogame hardware is here. It is becoming easier to make more realistic-looking games. At the same time, regulation of game content is getting even tighter. So we have an issue: more freedom for gamemakers to express themselves, to make reality out of their desires, but only within more harsh constraints.

I know many game creators who would like parents to be given rules and classes in how to educate their children before people start to put all the responsibility on games and call for harsher rules. One thing is clear: videogames will continue to be accused of everything, and it will only get worse.

But, in the middle of this, I would like to point to one important thing. Nintendo is again challenging the industry with a revolutionary controller for its next console. High-resolution visuals will be PS3 and X360's domain; the Revolution will not compete with these consoles. But I would find it very interesting to see Nintendo taking lots of market share from both Sony and Microsoft with its unique approach to family-friendly videogame content – if that happened, people would not be able to use the 'it is the videogames' fault' argument. Saying that, it is also true that there will probably be those who'll make violent games for Revolution, using its new controller as a sword with which to kill people, for instance. Clearly, the videogame industry is far from being out of the woods yet…

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess



After the fustration of the delays and the concerns over the transformation of Cowhand Link, it's easy to forget that it's a *new Zelda*, and it's nearly here. Nearly.
GC, NINTENDO

Guitar Hero 2



It may be the definition of greed to want the next before you've finished the last, but the prospect of new songs is the ideal motivator as you wrestle through Expert.
PS2, TBA

Gears Of War



There's still nothing to suggest that Epic's potentially distant 360 title won't be style over substance. But screw issues like that – let's get out there and destroy us some beauty.
360, MICROSOFT

Drawing in new talent
Why artists are eyeing up gamers

There's no doubt that some of the scenes in *Shadow Of The Colossus* can provoke the kind of introspection and emotional ambiguity normally associated with art. But what happens when 'real' artists get in on the game?

We've done 'Are games art?' and found that all it does is mire you in an argument about art itself. We've had games *as* art, and been led to some interesting installations made mostly out of old NES carts. And we've done the art *of* games, revelling in the visual invention to be found in titles like *Killer 7* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*. But what about art *in* games?

This month we talk to American McGee, currently collaborating with celebrated art duo Kozyndan on *Bad Day LA* (p22 and 34), to Sony Liverpool about its collaboration with four artists for the breathtaking Omega Pack expansion to *Wipeout Pure* (p16), and to Keita Takahashi, whose training as an artist and sculptor was a major influence in the unique style of *Katamari Damacy* (p54). This isn't a flash in the pan or a cheap grab at publicity but a growing trend of cooperation between gamemakers who see the value in having more challenging, individual art style, and artists who are looking for new and flexible outlets for their art.

There's no question it's a shift partly produced through technology. Talking to the artists involved in the Omega project, it's clear that preparing their work for integration into *Pure* didn't require a major deviation from their usual working practices. But what's also clear is their enthusiasm for the medium, considering it offers a cross between the total visual freedom of painting or animation and the newer artistic interests in installations or multimedia works which require interaction from their audience. Games bring together a blank canvas, a structural challenge and a potential for audience involvement in a way nothing has before.

Will this crossover be good for games? Will it strengthen their case for cultural legitimacy? After all, there's still huge scepticism about the kind of modern art which takes advantage of modern technology. Might it not just produce a little corner of the videogame market clogged up with pretentiously presented, badly implemented hybrids that alienate art and game lovers alike? Perhaps. But we'll leave Kozyndan, 123klan, Jon Burgerman, Mark James, Neil McFarland and Keita Takahashi – and their vibrant, arresting games – to make their own case for the defence.











FORMAT: **360, GC, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (MONTREAL, SHANGHAI, ANNECY)**
ORIGIN: **CANADA, CHINA, FRANCE**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2006**

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent

Splinter Cell splinters, as Sam Fisher divides his loyalty between two factions, and two generations of hardware



Though not yet fully lit, and suffering from a terrible framerate, the 360 version already has its moments. The sight of Fisher rappelling down the side of a skyscraper in (surprise, surprise) Shanghai is a memorable one

Julian Gerighty, the Shanghai-based co-producer of the 360 and PC versions of the fourth *Splinter Cell*, is frank. "Outside of Ubisoft, there are very few action-adventure games that get released on a yearly basis... my main worry when we were approached with *Splinter Cell 4* was, OK, how do we keep *ourselves* interested? Let alone consumers, retailers, the business, everybody. How do we still keep it fresh?" Looking over their shoulders at the varied fortunes of two other famous franchises that had gone beyond trilogy, *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil*, they saw that they had only one option: change.

So the rather pithier subtitle of this instalment, *Double Agent*, rams home the point. Grizzled spook Sam Fisher, devastated by the death of his daughter in a car crash, is offered a deniable, 'nonofficial cover' (or NOC) assignment by his NSA paymasters: get sent to high-security prison, stage a breakout with a convicted terrorist incarcerated there, infiltrate the terrorist group, and feed back information from within. In itself, this premise will take the game's style beyond the stealth purism of previous *Splinter Cells*, as the challenge will be to balance levels of trust with both terrorists and spies, and often to hide what you're doing rather than to hide yourself. Prioritising NSA objectives over terrorist ones, and standing firm on mettle-testing moral choices, will gain you more technical support from the NSA, but restrict your access within the terrorist HQ that acts as a mission hub. Balancing the two will be the most rewarding, but most difficult path.

Another challenge: how to handle the evolution of the franchise across two generations of home hardware, as well as handhelds. With Ubisoft keen to invest in next-generation technology and expertise, and to give the *Splinter Cell* brand a meaningful start in the brave new world, a separate, optimised version for 360 and PC was a given. That's being handled by the Shanghai studio which developed *Pandora Tomorrow*'s singleplayer campaign. "A lot of the resources that we need [for next-generation development] – art resources, engineering resources – are really high quality in China. And cheaper," notes Gerighty. Meanwhile, Ubisoft Montreal, home to the first and third games, works on GC, PS2 and Xbox code, while a second Montreal team is creating an only superficially similar PSP game (see 'Essential mix'). The multiplayer specialists at Annecy are the fourth and final piece of a vast undertaking that spans three continents.

The approach isn't without its dangers. Although the two versions share the same philosophy, story arc and key

The challenge will be to balance levels of trust with both terrorists and spies, and often to hide what you're doing rather than to hide yourself



In promo artwork and opening stages, *Splinter Cell* has lost its key visual signature: Fisher's green goggles. This, along with the storyline, indicates that Ubisoft has realised it needs to humanise its hero





The Shanghai studio is proud of the realism and variety of its character art, an area of Xbox 360 presentation it feels will need a lot of attention. Non-symmetrical faces and carefully textured, rumpled clothes abound





There's a concerted effort to make *Double Agent* a much less sombre, more varied and visually exciting experience. In the 360/PC version, swimming and skydiving will be possible, and levels will take place in sunlit, war-torn cities and blinding snowscapes

locations (the prison where the game begins, and the terrorist HQ it centres on), they will likely be vastly different experiences, and the ability – or willingness – of the PS2 and Xbox team to realise *Double Agent*'s grander concepts is already in question. Gerighty insists that the intention in both cases is to blend the Shanghai studio's cinematic leanings with what he calls Montreal's 'scientific', hardcore stealth approach, but early glimpses of PS2 and 360 code cast doubt on how much of a two-way street the production has been.

Shanghai certainly isn't blind to *Chaos Theory*'s superior reputation to its own game: "It was so appreciated, so loved compared to the other ones that I think we'd be fools to turn our backs on that," says Gerighty, promising that its play style has largely been adopted. But then there are the striking 'directed moments', essentially playable cinematics, composed in Shanghai by Hugues Martel, a French animator who worked on Belleville Rendezvous. These are supposed to frame *Double Agent*'s toughest choices and give it the emotional and visual punch that will set it apart from its predecessors – and the two examples we're shown, a skydive and a genuinely appalling execution, are indeed remarkable. But from what little we've seen and heard, it seems they will be either be crudely implemented in or simply omitted from lesser-specced versions. And that's before you consider the huge, heavily populated environments and particle weather effects in the 360 version that would be technically impossible to replicate, but that have obvious, far-reaching implications for stealth gameplay. Montreal will have its work cut out to prevent its own game ending up caught in limbo between *Splinter Cell*'s past and its future.

There have been tough calls to make in Annecy, too. That studio's unique, exquisitely tuned spies-vs-mercenaries multiplayer game found a passionate fanbase in its two incarnations to date, but has been judged too involved, exclusive and forbidding for most *Splinter Cell* players, and has regretfully been ditched (from the GC/PS2/Xbox versions, at any rate – 360/PC multiplayer remains under wraps). Under a new mantra of accessibility and 'instant fun', a spy-vs-spy, thirdperson, 'acrobatic stealth combat' game has been designed. The maps are compact and symmetrical for quick understanding, but laden with secrets and traps. The acrobatic moves and onscreen button prompts for close combat are comfortably reminiscent of a singleplayer adventure. The action is supremely quick. After a round of a two-vs-two mode entitled Team Hack (hack your opponents' terminal while defending your own), misgivings were easily set aside. Annecy wanted to make an online multiplayer game that was fun the first time you tried it; it has succeeded, unequivocally.

There is much, much more to learn about every aspect of this game, or suite of games. There isn't one version that isn't intriguing and laden with possibility – the central, universal concept of maintaining counter-intelligence cover sees to that. But, like any mole with a split personality, *Splinter Cell Double Agent* runs a distinct risk of ending up its own worst enemy.



Essential mix

For the PSP game – currently codenamed *Splinter Cell Essentials* – Ubisoft hasn't made either a port or a best-of remix of previous iterations; it's done both, and neither. It's true that the episodic *Essentials* will feature the prison and HQ from *Double Agent* and the Penthouse from *Chaos Theory*, among other familiar settings, with new objectives. But it will also possess all-new content that stretches into Fisher's past and future, featuring him as a young Navy SEAL in Columbia and detailing his recruitment into NSA operations. It's gorgeous and fully featured, you can save at any point, and it could well be a genuinely enticing companion piece to *Double Agent* for fans, or as a primer for newcomers. It's an enlightened approach to extending franchises on the format.





Fisher will occasionally need to cooperate with another character using moves borrowed from *Chaos Theory*'s multiplayer. There are multiplayer coop levels too that flesh out the backstory, including that of the two agents tasked with starting the prison riot





Bad Day LA

With sharp satire and a striking visual approach, this could represent a good day for gaming



FORMAT: **PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ENLIGHT**
DEVELOPER: **THE MAURITANIA IMPORT EXPORT COMPANY**
ORIGIN: **HONG KONG**
RELEASE: **Q1 2006 (US) TBA (UK)**



You're not alone

Anthony may be alone in his immunity to LA's culture of fear, but he soon recruits a roster of misfits to assist him. McGee explains: "They are essentially automatic weapons that tag along on your adventure. The only control you have over them is in choosing which character is active. There is an amount of strategy in selecting which support character to engage at any given time. The Sick Kid, for instance, is great against normal human opponents, but not so great against zombies, since he is a zombie himself. The Sergeant is like a walking bomb. Great for destroying everything in sight, but the collateral damage he creates can offset his destructive advantage."

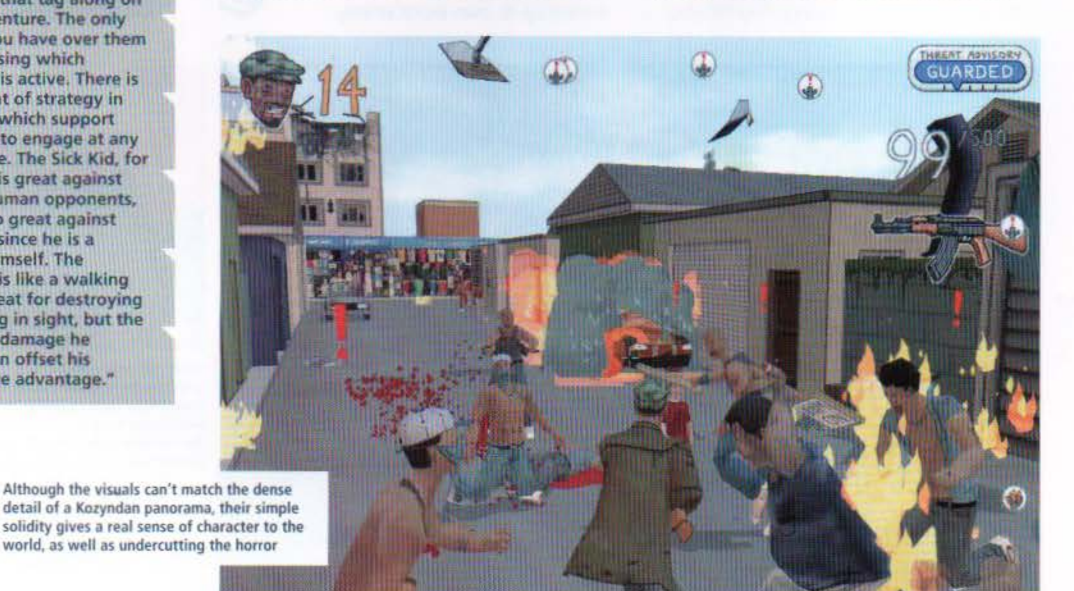
We're used to gradual evolutions in gaming, be they in technical, graphical, even artistic fields. And you might have expected the same as gaming explores other new horizons: politics, current affairs, satire. But with *Bad Day LA*, **American McGee** has taken a tradition that had long since become dormant (in mainstream games at least), and pushed from a standing start to a racing finish. Taking on fistfuls of current taboos – terrorist attacks, immigration, obesity, tsunamis – it paints a venomous, if hilarious, picture of an America under siege not from real dangers, but from a state-imposed culture of fear.

Nor is paint the wrong word. *Bad Day LA*'s art style has been defined by a duo of collaborative artists known as Kozyndan. Long feted for their bunny-based pastiches of Japanese art, as well as their densely dramatic cityscapes, they proved a perfect fit for McGee's vision, not least because of their flair for humour. It's a game that clearly carries the risk of causing substantial offence, and Kozydan's instinct for incidental detail and their softening abstraction of real-world scenes undercuts the horror of the situations the game depicts.

And it's quite a situation. McGee cues up a litany of disasters to befall an unsuspecting LA, one after another – terrorist attack, zombie outbreak, earthquake and Mexican invasion – and leaves it up to a voluntarily homeless beatnik (whose renunciation of material wealth makes him the only person in LA with nothing to lose, and therefore nothing to fear) called Anthony to save the city. As he moves through the game he'll have to keep a lid on the level of chaos he encounters – extinguishing burning babies, taking out looters, fighting off zombies – as he pursues his ultimate goals.

McGee has been very open about the fact that the structure of the gameplay is something that only evolved as the game developed, rather than being the framework around which the look and story of the game were fitted. Was that a risk? "Since game development is still such a new thing it is difficult to say what's more risky. I've seen games developed based on extensive designs and pre-existing properties that flounder during production and fail upon release. Genre-creating games by definition start with a blank sheet of paper. Either way when you're trying to tell a story inside a game it is important to get that story fleshed out early and to continue developing it as the game is being developed."

For all McGee's confidence, it's inevitably the fundamentals of the gameplay which represent the biggest unknown in *Bad Day LA*. If it works well, the contrast between juggling individual human needs and the bigger story of the game could prove as refreshing as its polemical stance. But even if it proves an awkward combination, it still stands out as vibrant and outspoken proof that gaming hasn't entirely succumbed to conservative sequelitis.



Although the visuals can't match the dense detail of a Kozyndan panorama, their simple solidity gives a real sense of character to the world, as well as undercutting the horror



***Bad Day LA*'s writing was always going to need to be strong if it wanted to get the most out of its controversial subject matter. Early indications, both in the scripting and the parody propaganda, are that it succeeds**





Encircling Anthony are small round icons which alert him to the state of each individual in the area. The threat level continually needs to be managed as you progress by 'improving' enough of these people, whether by wiping out zombies or taking the injured to hospital



Inphyy's first level of special attack is a series of sweeping dashes that cut down whole ranks, but her second is a true screen-clearer, plucking the souls from all visible foes and leaving the playfield eerily motionless

N3: Ninety-Nine Nights

Mizuguchi's game for the masses can't be accused of skimping on the masses

The first released image of *Ninety-Nine Nights* – all autumnal colour and standing-room-only battlefield scale – stood as haughty as its heroine, a poster-child for the 360's bigger, sharper, better vision. But if *Kingdom Under Fire* developer Phantagram's fingerprints were immediately apparent, the input of Tetsuya Mizuguchi was less so. Would combos be measured to the beat of a battlefield drummer, or enemy lines' weak spots sounded out by operatic accompaniment?

N3's playable build, dating back to the Tokyo Game Show, struck down such elaborate expectations with the same grim detachment as wing-pauldroned Inphyy did the armies of her enemies. On one hand, you've seen all this before; on the other, you've never seen *all* this before. "*Dynasty Warriors* is a great game, but it's a mass battle game of the past," explains Phantagram CEO and executive producer **Sang Youn Lee**. "You face 30-40 enemies on the screen, and hack at three or four at a time. We display about 2,000 characters onscreen at the moment, and your normal moves knock off scores at once. A special move sweeps hundreds of them."

There's a sensation – or lack of sensation – that the ensuing two-button massacre loses some of the drama that it intends to inspire: the horizon barely has time to darken with enemy ranks before they're obliterated in an apocalyptic finisher. "You need to think about how to chain the monster moves effectively and strategically to defeat thousands of enemies," Lee explains, but this smartbomb-hungry play style seems unsportingly distant to the bawdy scrapping that distinguished *KUF*. However, Lee makes no pretension to *N3* being anything other than a numbers game: asked if he considered tightening the scale to improve individual behaviour, he says: "Reducing the number of enemies was not an option – although our goal is to make them look better, and behave smarter, than other games."

Looks are obviously the least of *N3*'s concerns – the burnished metal effects of Inphyy's armour alone are so spectacular as to draw attention from its immodesty. "Q Entertainment really knows how to appeal to the Japanese market," notes Lee, referring equally to the triple-figure kill counter and flashes of thigh. "They understand how to create a quality presentation; we couldn't have done the motion-captured cutscenes without them." The storyline, which Lee politely avoids discussing, could be the missing link between Xbox 360's muscle and *N3*'s soul – known to thread between multiple playable characters and viewpoints.

But more rests on the game's opening night than the other 98, and its delays, even beyond its much-needed launch slot, suggest all concerned take that responsibility seriously. "If we can create the *best* mass action games," Lee considers after being asked if Phantagram risks becoming stereotyped, "I don't mind the label."

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS JAPAN**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT/PHANTAGRAM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN/KOREA**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2006**

Playable character Dwingvatt hails from the race Inphyy stamps out in the TGS demo. "Each character has unique abilities, weapons and control schemes – expect to play as knights, magicians, rogues and more," Lee reveals



Perhaps misleadingly, the TGS build took place in a barren, ashen ravine, stark contrast to the brighter climes of other scenes. A fresh, perhaps more Q Entertainment-styled interface (as seen here) has also been added



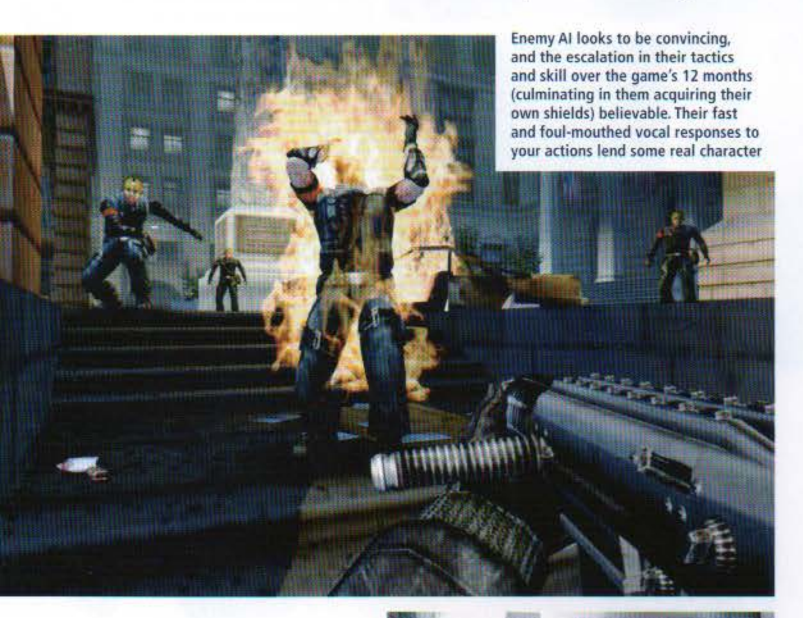
360 nights

Quizzed on Microsoft's prospects in Japan, Lee shrugged off *N3*'s lack of prominence in the scattershot TGS keynote: "*N3* is a good example of Microsoft's new relationship with Asian developers, and I know it influenced a lot of Asian developers to join Microsoft. That's all that matters... I think Microsoft have learned a lot from their mistakes. When I talk to them about their policies, I can sense that they put a lot of thought into the Asian market, and a lot of other Asian developers would agree that Microsoft has changed. It all depends on how many quality titles are ready for the Asian market – but I think 360 will be a lot more successful than its predecessor."

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q2 2006**

Urban Chaos: Riot Response

Rescued from Argonaut's ashes, here's an incendiary FPS where you don't dodge bullets – you stop them



Enemy AI looks to be convincing, and the escalation in their tactics and skill over the game's 12 months (culminating in them acquiring their own shields) believable. Their fast and foul-mouthed vocal responses to your actions lend some real character

First, when under development at Argonaut, it was *Roll Call*; then it was *Zero Tolerance*; now, this brutal shooter bears a borrowed name, originally belonging to Eidos' five-years-gone and, it hopes, long-forgotten PlayStation action-adventure. The change reflects the games' shared setting: a very-near-future city that gangs have brought to the brink of lawless anarchy. It also reflects a progressive shift in emphasis from the original idea of collaboration with emergency-services personnel that still colours *Urban Chaos*' action to the extreme-prejudice law enforcement that now shapes it. At the heart of that is a design device as brave and simple, and potentially as radical, as recharging health, or a two-weapon limit: the riot shield.

It's not entirely new – *Perfect Dark Zero* boasts just such an item – but it is the first time an FPS has been built from day one around permanently and instantaneously available, almost completely impregnable cover. The staff at Rocksteady, a 24-strong team formed around an ex-Argonaut core, say that its use has become second nature to the extent that they feel the lack of it in virtually every other game they play. Without a hands-on playtest it's easy to imagine that the unbreakable shield might precariously tip the game's scales of risk and reward, but in demonstration it certainly seems to create a unique tactical rhythm and a satisfyingly condensed, intense style of play. Action comes in taut, breathless bursts, but it's always possible to buy time to think behind the cracked, blood-smeared and cloudy shield visor (at least until later enemies start trying to rip it from you), meaning there'll be much less piecemeal trial-and-error progress.

T-Zero, the controversial anti-gang unit to which you belong, has been given command of paramedics, police and firefighters, and you'll usually be accompanied by one or more of these, able to assign orders to them with a smart context-sensitive interface around your cursor. The public-service theme isn't especially convincing given the extreme violence that saturates the game; a stun gun is a pretty half-hearted concession to non-lethal force when its overuse can set masked gangbangers on fire. There doesn't seem much depth to the team system either, with paramedics just walking health packs, and firemen little more than a key to fire's lock – though the latter's presence looks like it may lead to some dramatic level design.

Where this side of the game should work – as should the story structure, with the 12 levels representing 12 months of a year in which T-Zero gradually gathers public support, reported in the video newscasts that bookend them – is as a crude but sturdy emotional and thematic hook for *Urban Chaos*' otherwise heartless action. Alone, it might not have been enough to raise the game's head above the crowds of competing console shooters. But with the riot shield, it looks like Rocksteady already has that covered.



As well as your riot shield and your arsenal (an unrestricted 21-gun salute), the environment can be used against the gangs. Shoot out the lights to hamper their accuracy, or step into thick smoke and use a thermal-imaging gasmask to pick them out from within



Package tour

With its small team, Rocksteady is somewhat understandably focusing on creating a compact game with strong replay incentives. Completion of secondary objectives – for example, taking down the gang leader at the end of the first level non-lethally – will open up six 'emergency situations' that branch off the story. These are (even) more high-impact, less strategic missions, often a case of search-and-rescue against the clock. They in turn will unlock powerful new weapons for use in the game's main thread. A wealth of tertiary objectives and stat targets for every level govern further unlocks, including weapon upgrades, a bonus level and an extra-hard mode. There will also be eightplayer multiplayer support with a team-based, cops vs gangs style, and dedicated maps.



There are more technically impressive games on both PS2 and Xbox, but *Urban Chaos* has an earthy, gritty look that suits its setting well, and the choking smoke and ash of burning interiors are powerfully conveyed. The ragdoll physics system is also well-engineered







Hostage situations provide the set-piece highlights to some levels, serving up more protracted and strategic gun battles. The slaughter isn't interrupted for long, though, with a grisly finish guaranteed

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (LA)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle-Earth II

EA captures a vital resource (the book rights) from its enemy (Vivendi) in its latest Tolkien RTS

There were howls from purists when EA won the filmic Lord Of The Rings game licence, and echoes of those howls when it united those with the literary game rights previously held by Vivendi. And, for a moment, looking at the new ideas in *Battle For Middle Earth II*, you can see why. Gollum, it transpires, has been introduced as a hidden, neutral unit. Find him and kill him, and you can take the ring. With the ring you can summon a special attack in the form of Sauron or Galadriel. At first sight, it seems like the kind of crassness the purists feared.

Happily, closer inspection proves that much more thought and imagination has gone into it than that, all of which adds up to an RTS which may well prove fresher and more compelling than the rather pedestrian original. Take possession of that ring, for instance, and that news – and your location – becomes apparent to your opponents, producing a scramble for power that feels more CTF than RTS. And, once you've managed to return it to your base and summon your super-unit, sending him into battle risks being a terribly Pyrrhic victory: should the unit be killed, it explodes, destroying all nearby units but leaving the ring behind. As well as replicating some of the tensions between power and its price the book has at its heart, it also helps to ensure the game never descends to stalemate.

A similarly deft touch has been brought to base building, and the improved engine brings more units to the battlefield and more detail to the battles. It was always impractical for the film and book rights to be separated, and here EA strengthens its case for being the best place for them both.



A unit cap has yet to be set, but what has increased is the number of fighters in each unit, guaranteeing the game more busy grandeur. Access to the books also increases the options for a colourful supporting cast

Full Auto

Can Sega's racing battler offer more than burned-out takedowns and twisted metal?



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **PSEUDO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2006**





Without the benefit of dramatic reverse-angle shots like this during the game (perhaps a right-analogue freelook would have solved that), appreciating the full scale of the damage you cause won't be easy – not until the next lap

It's funny how a desire to trump *Burnout* has caused the battle racing genre to essentially lap itself, circling right back to where it was in 1996 with the release of *Twisted Metal*. Though this may be somewhat harsh – *Full Auto* at least making an effort to blow things up with style and veering clear of the hip-hop massive – there's still a concern that its genre is now a one-car race in which bullets feel like overkill.

As a 360 game – the first of its specific kind and leading the revved-up *Burnout Revenge* to the shelves – it gains some distance on its previous-generation peers with decent antialiased HD, vivid bodywork for its cars and plenty of bang per volley of fire. The problem with taking this Death Race 2000 style of mayhem into circuit races is that its portrayal of destruction is seldom appreciable for more than the split second before you speed past your target. But *Auto's* ability to retain every scrap of blasted masonry and burning wreckage across multiple laps is its solution, the idea being that a pristine city will present a transformed challenge once it lies in rubble two laps later.



Watching your car go up in flames is a routine pleasure once weapons are activated. Deciding quickly whether to reverse time or simply wait for a respawn is crucial

Beside its range of weapons, the two assets *Auto* provides the player are Turbo and Unwreck gauges filled through stylish driving and destruction. The latter is a lift from the oft-plundered *The Sands Of Time*, allowing you to rewind overly damaging crashes or otherwise time-devouring trips into alcoves and obstacles. But never does it feel like there's one unifying stroke of inspiration behind the smoke and shattered wing-mirrors, and it's unlikely that there ever was. Intuitive controls that say much of 360's controller layout should make its bumpy ride (in which vehicles swing with a force similar to that of *Crazy Taxi*) an enjoyable one. But for how long it sustains its charm once the crumbling scenery and suicide jumps become the status quo is unknown.



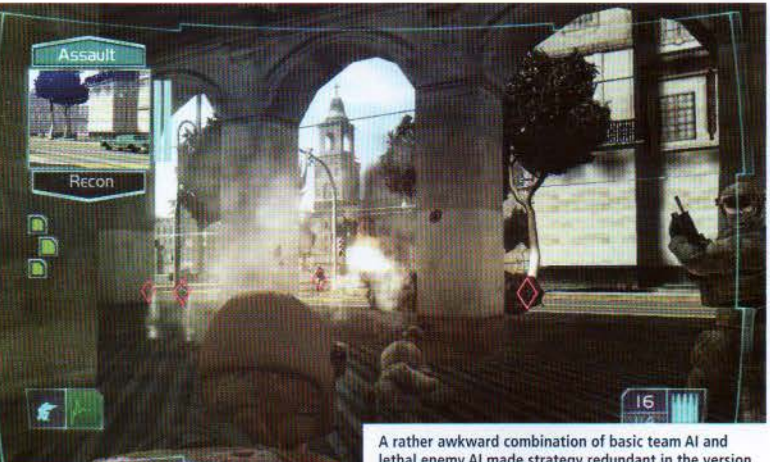
As is often the case with games such as this, the degree to which real-world physics are exaggerated to suit its goals will strongly affect its appeal. Too little weight and gravity could turn its thick layers of destruction into a floating mess



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **GHOST RECON TIWAK, RED STORM**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE, US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter

The future of war may not transpire as predicted during E3, but it shouldn't be too far off target



A rather awkward combination of basic team AI and lethal enemy AI made strategy redundant in the version we played. Clearly there is much balancing to be done



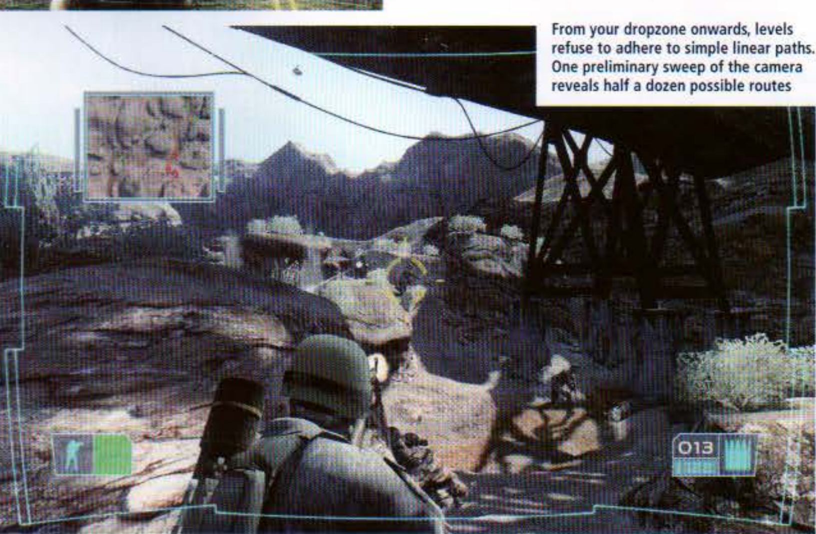
Since X05, the wait for the third *Ghost Recon* has involved anticipating how close to the original target video – given the game's slip to a February release and its state in Amsterdam – the final build might get. A new, more polished version suggests progress, but towards resemblance rather than realisation. Though the E3 clip's explosive effects and fluid animation still seem unreachable from where the game is now, enough has come together since October to suggest that many of its other qualities lie within grasp.

An opening helicopter descent is encouraging – the Mexico City skyline resembling a *Battlefield* map urbanised from HUD to horizon. As you'd expect of game running on hardware such as Xbox 360, everything is rendered in 3D with minimal assistance from static backdrops. A setting sun warms almost every surface, shadows (soon to be replaced by more convincing soft shadows) playing on everything else. Much of that mid-range PC look has been shaken off, and it's likely that select post-processing effects will ultimately make a world of difference.

Speakeasy

Binding together the equipment and personnel of an IWS unit, the Cross Com is key to *Warfighter's* tactical model. Represented by a fixed video overlay on your HUD, it allows for the assignment of various support units to a target defined by your reticle. An airborne drone looks down upon the environment, its reconnaissance altitude dropping it momentarily within range of enemy fire while it uncovers hidden units. A helicopter gunship can be directed so as to overwhelm targets that are entrenched or strategically placed, while your ground units' movements are relayed via personal cameras as they fall into a position determined by either yourself or AI. Think *SWAT 4*'s interface, streamlined to complement a larger environment and greater intensity of action.

From your dropzone onwards, levels refuse to adhere to simple linear paths. One preliminary sweep of the camera reveals half a dozen possible routes







Advanced Warfighter should offer an insight into the reliability of target footage in this latest hardware generation. While its latest build is missing antialiasing, soft shadows and about 40 per cent of its animation, its aesthetic appears faithful



Aerial reconnaissance courtesy of your remote drone is essential for spotting entrenched enemies before their traps are sprung. This too, though, can become a target

Warfighter's concept is immediately intriguing. It suggests a rare instance of futuristic science being employed outside of science fiction, bound to the obsessive realism of a military simulation. What results is a game that feels more cutting edge than those set centuries from now: a strange and seemingly contradictory notion, but one that's entirely upheld once the controller is in your hands. Though its weapons are recognisably contemporary, the sheer lethality of the Integrated Warfighter System – a fictional concept Ubisoft has extrapolated from the US Army's Future Force Warrior programme – is the game's innovative sell.

The IWS soldier's rifle can fire through a wide variety of obstacles to its targets, its camouflage achieving near invisibility in most environments and its monocular visor able to track targets across great distance while maintaining wireless communications in the field. The game's tricks are to maintain the hostility of a modern warzone in spite of this extraordinary imbalance between sides, and to unite your wide range of tools and abilities under a control system reliable enough to handle a situation in which a single bullet can mean instant death.

Strategic movement is therefore a simple proposition. Pushing against a surface stands you against it, allowing you to then shuffle along its length while maintaining cover, peek around its edges to snipe, or choose between a button press and an analogue pull away to resume normal movement. Efficient context-driven controls exist for changing posture, vaulting obstacles and performing rolls. The mission we tried was simple, with team AI largely incomplete, but the diversity (and often verticality) of routes bodes well. Indeed, those who would never have entertained a *Ghost Recon* prior to E3, who might now feel misled by the drop from transcendent early footage to more conventional reality, may yet be thankful for the deception.





The Outfit

The freeform tactical shooter hands out marching orders for its multiplayer battlefield: you have ten seconds to comply

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **RELIC STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E157**

The balance and longevity of multiplayer modes are always hard to judge from a short playtest, but those of Relic's light-hearted WWII title (whose campaign mode we previewed last month) are more difficult than most. Not so its instant appeal: *The Outfit*'s multiplayer mantra is 'ten seconds to first contact', and matches with four players or more, plus dozens of supporting AI units, are nothing if not raucous and immediate. But the lie of the land, so superficially familiar, is so changed by Destruction on Demand – the game's marquee feature, the ability to buy reinforcements, bombardment and hardware at will – that the implications for its frantic turf wars are hard to fathom. Especially when you never have more than ten seconds to think about it.

It's certain that of the three game modes – Deathmatch, Destruction and the base-capturing Strategic Victory – the latter will be the main event. More surprisingly, the game's potential is initially most apparent in one-on-one face-offs. With more time to plan, and more entrenched, less chaotic firefights, the urge to run and gun evaporates, and smart (but still quick) unit selection soon becomes paramount. It may take serious depth of experience and communication to translate this to battles on a larger scale, though, and with the side with the upper hand having better resources by default, it's unclear how possible it will ever be to turn the tide.



Relic's aim for *The Outfit* to 'feel big even when small' has certainly been achieved. Even twoplayer matches are busy, and the eightplayer cap is very unlikely to seem low

What is clear is that Relic's commitment to Live is comprehensive. *The Outfit* will be amply supported on the Marketplace: additional multiplayer maps will be available for download at launch, and a team has already been assigned to work on new content for a full year after the game ships. It's possible that some maps will be free, and that the singleplayer campaign will be extended, too. Despite its pleas for a spectator mode being denied, Microsoft must be delighted with this display of faith in Xbox 360's online manifesto.



The three playable Nazi commanders' strengths, squad commands and weapon sets are almost exact matches for their opposite numbers in the Outfit. As in the singleplayer campaign, you can switch characters any time you die

Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers

A once oversimplified simulation sells out as Pandemic takes the gamer's side



FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E156**





The series' slick animations and penetrating audio may have lost their edge somewhat since its first tour of duty, but *Ten Hammers* nonetheless retains a crisp and convincing aesthetic, especially in Xbox 720p – a resolution that more people are now likely to enjoy

For *Ten Hammers*, there were always going to be two paths: sticking to the guns of its US Army prototype or dressing itself up for the wider gaming market. Its latest build – apparently a consumer demo of the game's singleplayer tutorial – suggests a decided move toward the latter. An introduction for new and veteran players alike, it's presented as a combination of standard baby-step objectives and, interestingly, a running monologue from an accompanying news reporter. His habit of echoing troop orders with journalistic prose is akin to having Randy Newman in your unit, but the efficiency of this opener compared to the original's boot camp is appreciable.

But more inspires scepticism in this brief glimpse than just the series' perpetually excited depiction of jingoism and its dehumanisation of the enemy. A set-piece that has you calling and then controlling into battle a Bradley tank, for instance, feels as much like a symptom of shame in the old *Warrior* engine as it does an attempted improvement. Likewise, a standoff in which a safe-house door is kept fortified by respawning enemies forces you into one specific flanking manoeuvre while never entertaining the notion that, in reality, anti-US insurgents mightn't consider a defensive position surrounded by their dead friends to be the best place to stand. But if the war Pandemic wishes to fight is for the hearts and minds of a more general audience, then perhaps these are the kinds of outlandish strategies we should now anticipate more of.

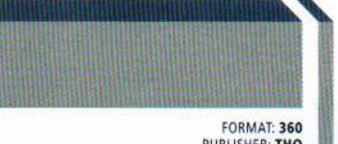
And they work, sometimes. Precision Fire – the zoom mode in which the player can directly snipe an enemy as they rise out of cover – does more than merely pander to those looking for a more tangible weapon than their team leader's vocal chords: it addresses a few shortcomings of the series' pen-and-paper ruleset, too, depriving enemies of the statistical invulnerability they once enjoyed when taking cover.

Remembering that this is potentially still alpha code, it's quite possible that *Ten Hammers* is still a battleplan half formulated, with implementation yet to be refined. Then again, perhaps this latest tour of duty was just too brief to win us over.





Checkpoint placement in this demo build may not be final, but it gives the player regular chances to restart should their chosen strategy backfire. Realistic damage means this happens quite often



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **CLIMAX RACING**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2006**

MotoGP '06

Climax is hanging effortlessly on to its first 360 project



The number of spectators really adds to the atmosphere. In addition to full grandstands, it's not unusual to see huge crowds swamping grassy banks on either side of the track. Unlike *PGR*, not all are animated, but there are more of them



While the MotoGP riders come in their official corporate colours, it is possible to customise the bike, rider, helmet and livery. Climax has also promised considerable investment in downloadable content



Rain or shine

The cost of the exquisite visual detail running at 60fps and the short development cycle undertaken by a relatively small team has meant some compromises have had to be made. As such, not every track will feature a rain setting. Instead, Climax has opted to recreate the weather as it affected the 2005 season and some rounds will therefore offer cloudy or rainy options. It's a reasonable compromise for the lack of a dynamic weather approach, although arguably the latter option might fail to stir players the way it can in a car-based racing game.

How fitting that Climax Racing is a development studio with a passion for speed, because for *MotoGP '06* it hasn't really had time to hang around. From start to alpha in just seven months for a first Xbox 360 outing is an aggressive development cycle for any studio.

Granted, there hasn't been a tremendous evolution with regard to content – a direct result of time restrictions and the licence, which obviously dictates most of the elements present and limits the amount of offbeat substance. The riders have been updated to the 2006 MotoGP season, along with the appropriate bike changes and three new circuit additions to the calendar. In addition, *MotoGP: URT2* players will recognise the (admittedly expanded) Challenge option while from *URT3* the Extreme mode returns (split again into 600, 1,000 and 1,200cc categories), an arcade-inspired twist on bike racing, featuring a series of radical, 'street'-style machines on fictitious road-based tracks (bringing the total number of circuits to 34). This dynamic is further boosted by the ability to upgrade performance components of the bikes and, while the options are relatively limited, they are nevertheless attractive.



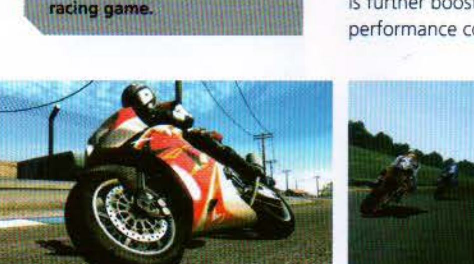
Compared to the MotoGP bikes, the Extreme models (right) have a more organic, raw appearance. The artist behind the Extreme designs comes from the world of bike customisation

Arguably, the primary attraction remains the game's MotoGP-faithful segment. Understandably, Climax hasn't spent too long tinkering with the series' renowned handling, which feels as accomplished as ever. Actually, that's not strictly true. It actually feels better, as though it has gained an additional level of subtlety. Shifting the rider's weight around and playing with the independent front and rear brakes while hurtling successfully around the track remains uncommonly rewarding, but it seems more convincing – puzzling given that the developer will admit this is an area that's left mostly untouched.

The answer, as ever, is in the detail. The audio has undergone considerable change and, in addition to sporting a wonderfully raw and aggressive note, it also provides valuable feedback – gear changes are easily determined while the notable difference between throttle on- and offload works toward giving a better indication of speed. The result is a more intuitive experience.

On the other hand, the visual improvement is anything but subtle. Bike models are stunning and more than a combination of exquisite lighting and considerably higher polygon count. Climax's artists have been pushing the 360 hardware to render materials that at a glance look indistinguishable from their real counterparts – the brushed aluminium, for instance, is utterly convincing. And it's not just the bikes, of course. From the believable tarmac underneath the rubber-looking tyres, to the individual blades of grass and daisies on the outside of the rumble strips, to the swaying trees and huge, semi-animated 3D crowds trackside – and all the way into the distant horizon – there is an remarkable amount of detail evident.

True, no amount of make-up, however deftly applied, will ever fool anyone into not seeing the core similarities *MotoGP '06* shares with its predecessors. But to be fair that is not the developer's intention – it simply aims to bring its highest profile franchise on to a next-generation platform and do so in a manner that best exploits the hardware available while negotiating significant time constraints. It's a balance Climax would appear to be striking capably, which should please any 360 owner with a penchant for bike racing.





As you'd expect from a title pushing Xbox 360, draw distance issues are no longer evident – the focus instead is on using tricks such as depth-of-field and filters to achieve subtle but convincing results

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

Monster Hunter Freedom

Those hunting for a different kind of killer app for the PSP may have new prey in their sights



The game is likely to shine brightest in multiplayer, but effort has been invested to improve the solo experience, with new sidequests which include finding ingredients for a potion-cooking cat cabal





There's a little bit of an irony at work here: *Monster Hunter* was an unusual and satisfying combat game geared around the PS2's online capabilities even though the majority of owners of Sony's console don't play online. *Monster Hunter Freedom*, close to a port of *Monster Hunter G* (the Japan-only sequel), is a game designed around the PSP, Sony's first online-ready console, and it doesn't go online.

What it does do, before you despair, is partner a more fully featured singleplayer adventure with ad-hoc support for up to four players. First impressions are very positive – for what's being sternly described as early code, the game is stable, the controls sensibly adapted for the handheld and the visuals every bit as able as the original to convey the sense of spacious, organic wilderness. The analogue-directed attacks of the original have been swapped for a simple light/heavy button-based system, which certainly simplifies the process, but does take some of the physicality out of the system. The magnificently macabre gushings of blood, however, remain.



Monster Hunter's laudably idiosyncratic interface design survives intact, but there is a slight concern that it could clutter the screen to the extent it compromises the actio

There seems little reason to doubt that this will prove as successful as the previous games as a test of nerve, communication and cooperation as you face off against some of the biggest quarry ever shoehorned into a videogame. And, although it's frustrating that the need to find enough Network Adapter-equipped friends will be replaced with the need to corral enough PSP-plus-*Monster-Hunter*-owning friends in the same place at the same time, it's almost certain that the camaraderie and chivalry that ad-hoc play should encourage will bring out the best in a very promising game.

Hippatte! Puzzle Bobble

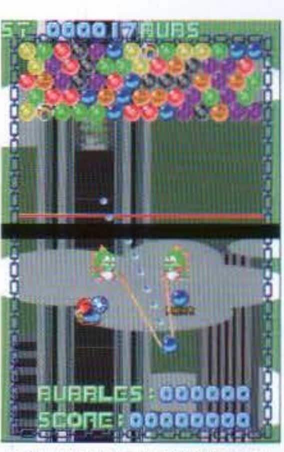
A remake of Taito's puzzle favourite risks bursting the bubble of hands-on control schemes

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **TAITO**
DEVELOPER: **MARVELOUS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Puzzle Bobble's broad appeal and Taito's omnipresent porting activity ensured that it was one of the first titles to appear on Nintendo's DS in Japan, and while the original, somewhat no-frills adaptation approaches its budget re-release in that territory, a new DS-specific version has been announced, continuing Marvelous' stylus-driven reinventions.

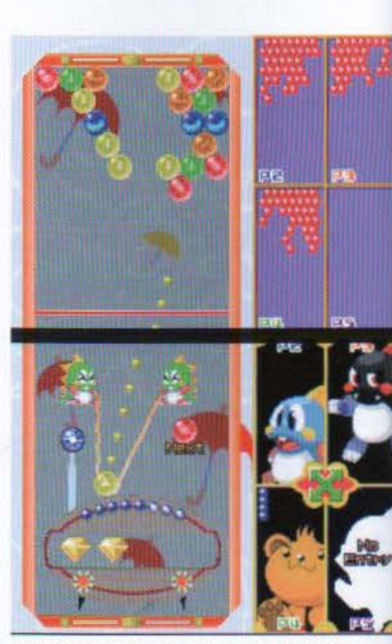
As that developer's *Rainbow Islands Revolution* added DIY functionality to generating rainbows, *Hippatte* replaces the traditional bubble ballista with an elastic band – requiring the player to manually slingshot bubbles into the upper screen (another improvement on the original version being the use of the DS's full screen area). Whether drawing the band back proves an overcomplication in tenser time-attack moments remains to be seen, as does its accuracy's effect on trick shots, but the larger issue may be whether the obvious tactile charm of the control method will wear off after the first few hundred bubbles.

There's no immediate suggestion that the game mechanics have been stretched out in any other area, with the expected fixed puzzle mode (over 250 will feature), endless play mode and versus-AI matches all featuring. Multiplayer, however, is encouraging of the DS communal huddle by offering up to fiveplayer support, either wirelessly or through game sharing. Those matches promise to be so highly strung as to bely Bub and Bob's enduring rosy grins – and may save *Hippatte* from banking too heavily on a concept *Mario 64 DS* relegated to a sideshow over a year ago.



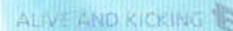
Ample stretch room is left for the band, though it's unclear if varying velocity has been introduced into *Puzzle Bobble* or if drag-and-shoot aiming will feel too slow





We can't help but hope the visuals are placeholder, although their subdued blandness is arguably preferable to last year's PSP title. It's surprising how unfurnished the screen feels without the series' familiar contraption





Alive & kicking

Blizzard liked Swinging Ape's work on the long-delayed StarCraft: Ghost so much, it bought the company. So what is it about this RTS offshoot that has people captivated?

We first meet **Steve Ranck**, former president of Swinging Ape and now Blizzard's vice president of console development, in a European press roundtable notable for being the first reception in our memory to open with: "Why hasn't Blizzard pulled the plug yet?"

"Pulled the plug... oh, on *Ghost*?" Ranck adjusts to Franco-American diplomacy. "Because we knew it would take time to get it right. I mean, [*StarCraft: Ghost* heroine] Nova can cloak: how do you make a game where the player can choose to be invisible?"

It's a reminder that there are more pressing issues for the developer than the expectation and impatience surrounding Blizzard's return to the console market. "We learned a lot from *Metal Arms*," Ranck later reflects, "but that was a straight-up shooter, and *Ghost* is such a sophisticated game beyond that. It's a massive project, and it's daunting to be entrusted with it, but we're all huge *StarCraft* fans – we play the RTS almost every night, and love everything about the setting."

Wrangling a literally standalone action title from an established RTS is no shortcut to success: Westwood's *Command & Conquer: Renegade* entirely failed to find variation or charisma in its source material. But where previous showings of *Ghost* indicated a capable action game set in the *StarCraft* universe, Ranck's team has worked to recreate *StarCraft* as an action game, drawing

TITLE: **STARCRAFT: GHOST**
FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (BLIZZARD CONSOLE DIVISION)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2006**

on the mechanics that cooperatively serve its themes. "One of our biggest challenges has been trying to identify exactly what *Ghost* is," he explains. "We've tried so many different iterations, you wouldn't believe – with her cloaking ability alone, or vision modes, with how much thirdperson acrobatics there are. Initially there were a lot, but the game right now is more… think of the elements of a really good shooter, and then add the abilities a Ghost has."

Nova's signature cloaking is complemented by an enhanced vision mode and a speed boost, the former not only revealing enemies through obstructions – useful for old-fashioned thirdperson evasion – but exposing the hearts thundering in their chests for surgical sniping. The boost, portrayed by slowing the gameworld, can be used for a quick escape or combined with a flick to firstperson for a devastating frontal assault, leaving a cat's cradle of tracer fire before time catches up in a roar of whipcracking recoil.

Regardless of perspective or method, confrontations are never less than brutal – and yet this darker tone hasn't overwhelmed the developer's inherent mischievousness. "*Ghost* is much more serious than *Metal Arms* ever was, where we could be so tongue-in-cheek and get away with anything – but there's a lot of black humour in *StarCraft*," says Ranck. A favoured developer tactic is to pass patrols while cloaked, rig the alarm switch with tripmines, then appear in plain view with explosive results. Elsewhere, commandeering an SCV heavy-lifting exoskeleton allows Nova to seize and lob unfortunate soldiers. "Terrans do work in very hazardous environments," Ranck sighs.



As the setting requires, the Terrans are only one form of opposition, with the ravenous Zerg mutations and monastic Protoss warriors demanding new approaches. Most immediately, each race has a different foil for Nova's trump card: Terran patrols carry short-ranged cloak dampeners, but Zerg will innately sense her and begin predatory concentric circling, whereas her powers may meet their match in the equally psionically gifted Protoss.

With only a Terran mission on display in singleplayer, demonstrating *Ghost*'s diversity falls to multiplayer, an aspect built from scratch over Swinging Ape's tenure. Its eight-versus-eight team skirmishes are at first overwhelming, a throng of individual gunfights punctuated by both intentionally and unintentionally airborne vehicles tumbling across the battlefield. But as team tactics coalesce, infantry affixing gun turrets to base entrances and vehicle wheelguards while Ghost snipers harry the one-man-artillery marines, it becomes clear that this isn't just RTS without the S. "We have worked *so* hard on making sure that the multiplayer's about teamwork, and that there's no lone hero that makes or breaks the game," agrees Ranck, obviously vindicated by our assessment. "We had to strip back the Ghost in multiplayer, otherwise you'd never want to play anything else."



Unarmoured, unaware targets can be dropped with a dispassionate kick and neck snap; heavier units may require a louder approach (top). Though matt in screenshots, in motion every metallic texture glitters

"We have worked hard so that multiplayer's about teamwork, and that there's no lone hero that makes or breaks the game"





A cat-and-mouse encounter with a single Terran marine suggests fighting squads of them will be fraught. Overcoming him can be a matter of cloaking, acrobatics, running gunfights, or attaching Nova's sticky mines to his visor









Terran infantry and Ghosts can drive vehicles in both single- and multiplayer, but cloaked Ghosts can also leap aboard an enemy vehicle, either quietly stowing away or relieving the driver of control by bashing his head into the steering column. As in the RTS, Ghosts can also fire 'lockdown' rounds that momentarily paralyse vehicles – with disastrous results if they're airborne



That doesn't prove entirely true, as even with rough edges on aiming and hit response, there's an enticing sense of weight behind every unit, weapon and vehicle. Each action has its quirks of movement: the gentle powerslide of a Vulture hoverbike, the heartbeat delay between fitting and launching a marine's grenade, the barrelling speed and tightening turning circle of a power-armoured unit on the run. "There's thousands of parameters for our characters, and we deliberate over every single detail until it feels right – I think we're getting very close," Ranck says. "All of our design decisions are inspired by the RTS, but obviously we expand on them, as the same rules don't work in 3D."

Ghost's star turn at the recent Blizzcon convention was the revelation that both Zerg and Protoss are to be playable multiplayer races – attempting to transpose *StarCraft*'s rare feat of balance and interface transparency over three distinct play strategies. The Zerg front is ready to be tested, and facing them from the Terran perspective recalls the overwhelming anti-tactic of the 'Zerg rush' even with a reduced-scale massacre. "I think it's easier to play as a team as the Zerg: they power up from running in a pack, and basically you don't need to aim – you just point them, start biting and scratching, and you'll hit something," observes Ranck. As in the all-Terran matches, once a Terran force acts in concert it proves more resistant to the rabid Zerg tide, but a global respawn timer for Zerg units, rather than the individual Terran timers, ensures a new wave is constantly building. Considered chaos like this bodes well for the third race's implementation, and vitally shows the multiplayer component to be more than a namecheck of *StarCraft* visuals – rendering them even more vividly for newcomers who can't identify each unit on sight.

Indeed, if the enthusiasm and intelligence behind *Ghost* should satisfy all but the most vehemently anti-console of Blizzard's fanbase, its impact could be just as strong on those who've never played a Blizzard title before, let alone *StarCraft*. For all the franchise's clout, it could have found no better partner than a remarkable developer striving to top a self-set high standard. "This is a dream project," Ranck says. "It's sci-fi action, it's *StarCraft*, it's Blizzard... on the one hand it's a huge, huge challenge, but on the other, it's what we've always wanted to do."



Though not to scale in this lineup – a scythe-limbed Hydralisk towers over Terran soldiers – Blizzard's eye for physiology is matched by the subtly different movement and control schemes of each unit



APE ESCAPADES

Before forming Swinging Ape, Ranck worked in Midway's arcade division for six years on the likes of *Hydro Thunder* and *Cruis'n USA*: "I'd always wanted to start my own company, but never felt I knew enough to do it. Finally I met a couple of guys at Midway just when the arcade industry was really dying off, and we thought we'd take a shot. Honestly, we had *no plan*. We had a couple of concepts but no code, no engine, no game design – we ended up contracting for another developer for a year, even though we were chomping at the bit to do our own thing. That let us get our feet on the ground and start what became *Metal Arms*." Originally envisioned as a sci-fi bounty hunter title, the team discovered the glut of similar titles in development elsewhere, and focused on their robotic world. "We signed with Sierra and grew from a staff of seven to 23 – actually, right before that, Blizzard approached us about doing the PS2 version of *Ghost*, but we decided to go with *Metal Arms*. It was a lot of fun: I think if we'd had another five months, it would have been a real triple-A title. But it got Blizzard's attention again." Were there any second thoughts about giving up independent development when attention turned to acquisition? "Are you kidding me? It's Blizzard!" Ranck laughs. "It was such a surreal experience for all of us: we were just doing our thing, making games and having fun, and suddenly Blizzard wants to acquire us. Our development methodology meshed so well with theirs, of iterating over and over until the game really works. As a small independent developer, we didn't always have that opportunity – what with having to hit milestones and get paid. We just did a double-take. It's perfect."





BULLITT TIME

Here's a cause for reflection: can the follow-up to Driver 3 really be as good as it seems?

While few gaming phenomena attract quite as much animosity as a bad game that turns a tidy profit, fewer still have polarised such critical and commercial responses to the same degree as the third *Driver*. Bugs were one thing. Broken handling and ruthless mission objectives were others. But it was the aggressive marketing of publisher Atari, together with the seeming inevitability of the game's subsequent success, that turned it into the reddest of rags.

Now, two years later, the dust has yet to settle. A pariah to join *Enter The Matrix* and *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* in the sixth generation's unholy trinity, *Driver 3* remains notorious. Developer Reflections' first shot at critical redemption, furthermore, is its sequel. How fair, we ask producer **Gareth Edmonson**, was its last game's reception?

"Well, obviously that's a difficult question to answer because there was a whole mixed bag of comments, some very fair and some not. We do accept there were things wrong with it – things that we should have made better with this game. But then there was also a great deal of 'let's just focus on that', and many people failed to look at the game objectively. There were some [positive scores]: across Europe we averaged 72 per cent or something. The Americans were harsher, and a few publications in Europe gave it a very, very hard time. But it wasn't the game it should have been."

Neither, for that matter, was *Driver 3* the game that Reflections – housed in the uppermost floors of its Newcastle offices atop a vertiginous spiral staircase – needed to get back at former Psygnosis compatriot DMA Design, or Rockstar North as it's known today. The Driver – a classically mischievous stab in *GTAIII* that doubles as one of that game's clumsiest and most detested missions – sparked a series of public exchanges between the two developers. It was a rivalry personified by Timmy Vermicelli – the armband-wearing hidden character (he couldn't swim) in *Driver 3* that the player had to kill ten times in order to unlock secret modes. With that game released and railed, Rockstar then returned opportune fire, directed again at the Tanner character and tucked away in early *San Andreas*.

"We were never truly worried about *GTA* until *GTAIII*," recalls Edmonson. "It was good fun, but it seemed – I don't know whether this is accurate – to be a bit of a budget title. Obviously, though, when we saw *GTAIII* we went: 'Oh God, they've done a good job of this'. There's no question of what they've achieved.

"The main thing that they took was the open city – go everywhere, do everything – type of game.

TITLE: **DRIVER: PARALLEL LINES**
FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **REFLECTIONS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2006**



On-foot action has been completely reengineered: a simple combination of lock-on and analogue switching ensures it's kept simple yet reliable. Potential targets are identified by reticules that light up to suggest the direction the stick needs to move

But their focus was never really on cars. *Driver*'s was, however, and *Driver 3*'s should have been but for various reasons wasn't. Which is why, with this game, the focus is very much back behind the wheel."

With the series having meandered so wildly from its first game's course – stumbling through its experiments with on-foot action and almost writing itself off completely with an indulgent filmmaker mode – it says something that both it and Reflections can be in any position to experiment some more. *Driver* remains a triple-A licence, hyped by its publisher with appropriate vigour and, it seems, unassailably saleable. How has it managed to maintain its position on the gaming radar in spite of its wild tangents?

"First of all, every one has been a huge seller," Edmonson states. "Even *Driver 3*. The thing about it is that it does tend to conjure up Hollywood car chases for a lot of people, while *GTA* does not. It's always had that '70s feel, though much less so in *Driver 3* – that was more a Michael Mann-type influence. Setting *Parallel Lines* in the '70s was therefore a very easy decision to make."

The fourth game purposefully recaptures a spirit that deserted the series when it arguably needed it most. Rather than hopping from one metropolis to another, it returns solely to the streets of New York – home of The French Connection and gritty parallel to the nameless, heavily inspirational streets of Walter Hill's 1978 chase classic, The Driver. Like Ryan O'Neal in that movie, it's adopted a new, also nameless character from society's underbelly to negotiate those streets, known only by the alias TK, or The Kid. Its litter-infested boroughs are faithfully dilapidated – Edmonson describes the New York of that era as "an absolute shithole" – and the cherished cliché of the refuse pile erupting over a passing bonnet is something he delights in reproducing while taking us on the tour.

Though the game is exciting (a headline-grabbing surprise in itself), its producer's demonstration warrants individual praise. Edmonson plays his company's game as if he'd bought it from a shop, weaving through traffic and environment as if he'd been playing it ever since and notably free of the intense caution with which most developers showcase their work. This, of course, speaks volumes of the series' progress over the last couple of years. Unpretentious phrases such as 'quick, easy, throwaway fun' bounce around the room, the agility of the various muscle cars as they plough through the game's missions providing sterling support.

When most of the genre's biggest titles have a characteristic pitch on hand to define their driving models, how does Edmonson choose to describe this one? "It's definitely movie-style," he declares. "The handling system is very realistic, but then we put a lot of tricks in there to get the big tail-out slides and to give it some more drama." We

The Kid strides with a distinctive nonchalance that stands him head and shoulders above his peers in the sandbox underworld. His weapon-select animations and firing poses are similarly colourful, though time will tell whether Reflections has laid it on a tad too thick with some of his enigmatic cohorts

TWO TIMER

Beyond its unexpected roadworthiness, the big reveal in *Parallel Lines* is its dual timeframe. If you thought you'd seen the last of *Driver 3*'s more contemporary assets, prepare to be spun out. We won't spoil things for you by elaborating on its story, but rest assured that the jump to modern day (complete with updated vehicles, streets and characters) comes as a result of a suitably Tarantino-esque twist. As you might expect, the difference in handling between the soft-suspension sportscars of the '70s and today's people carriers and supercars is considerable, as is the contrast of gritty urban decrepitude and modern cosmopolitan glamour.





Project manager Gareth Edmonson's devotion to *Driver* has kept it running through troubled times, and has finally beaten it into shape

were just thinking he'd had quite enough of that.

While it's unlikely that Edmonson particularly enjoys fielding questions about *Driver 3* (brother and studio co-founder Martin having left him with the pleasure shortly after its release), *Parallel Lines* leaves him little option, and for reasons entirely to Reflections' credit. Most of the questions you'd think to ask, it answers itself. Is it a return to the series' core values? Yes. Is it massmarket? Yes. Enjoyable? Again, yes. Repaired? Well, you're talking about *Driver 3* again already.

"There were a few things wrong last time," Edmonson admits. "The nature of that game was that it was quite linear within its open world, and there were technology restrictions we were under – particularly involving things like chasing other cars – that meant we had to fail you when you were chasing a car at tight distance. Things like smashing through lampposts and such: those were design decisions, though probably ill-advised ones. We reckoned that if you actually smacked into a lamppost, you wouldn't knock it over, so we were erring more on the side of realism with that game.

"With *Parallel Lines*, we've said: 'Let's just focus on the gameplay'. We have to make sure we don't frustrate the player this time by upholding reality too much, and as you've seen, you can now smash through everything. The sidewalks are now designed so they don't slow you down so much – enough, perhaps, to try and get you back on the road. The remaining clutter's simply there because, well, clutter's fun to do and fun to drive through."

Such talk, like his demonstration, is refreshing – devoid of those dismissive and somewhat untrustworthy disclaimers such as 'We have *x* months left to polish' and 'Remember, this is an old version'. We play *Parallel Lines* via a number of available builds, direct from Reflections' development platform. Though its framerate dips in unoptimised areas, it needs no further excuses because it's also quite clear that its physics engine, handling model, camera and combat work far better than expected. What kind of balance, we ask, is the studio attempting to strike between indulging in these systems and maintaining a smooth framerate?

"The problem with games like this, especially something like *Driver* where you have a lot of physics going on," explains Edmonson, "is that it can be unpredictable in terms of just how much you can get away with. You want a reasonable density of cars and you want them to look good, so you have to consider the usual compromises. But then you'll get times when there's a pile-up and a couple of unexpected cars crash into it, and then you're flying on through that with four cops after you. If you legislated for that to never drop a frame, you would compromise 95 per cent of the game.

"We're absolutely focused on it running smoothly and not dropping for most of the time, but we can't necessarily cater for everything. It's all AI-driven, so it's not like we can stage everything: sometimes a car will make a mistake and you'll have these overwhelming physics objects again. We've got ways of countering that, but not for every eventuality."

It doesn't sound as if any length of time will see a perfectly smooth ride achieved on PS2 (Xbox *Parallel Lines*, incidentally, is suitably better looking in terms of geometry, textures and specular maps) and, furthermore, it doesn't even seem likely that tight deadlines were the reason for *Driver 3*'s mistakes. But this occasion seems nonetheless appropriate for tackling a few related rumours. Just how is Atari for giving its developers space to breathe?



REV CONTROLLER

Edmonson believes that 30-40 per cent of a player's time in *Parallel Lines* will be spent attempting its many different sub-missions. Much of the Reflections team is now charged solely with devising new examples, and though they're entirely optional, the variety of upgrades offered by the game's parts shops makes their purpose clear. Every car, bike and HGV in the game can, and sometimes must, be upgraded to maintain superiority over the city's police pursuit forces. Custom bodywork, paintjobs, nitrous and performance parts are all available, with the presence of nearby test tracks suggesting a focus on vehicular versatility. Sufficient upgrades, it's said, can give supercars the horsepower to outpace rockets, the game's own engine seemingly capable of surviving the ensuing chaos.

"The commercial realities of it are always there," says Edmonson, "but it's also a developer's responsibility. All publishers put pressure on developers to get a game finished on time. Atari are no different. We're not in the luxurious position to say 'it's ready when it's ready' – very few developers are. The trick is to make as good a game as you can with the time that you've got.

"I will say, however, that this time we're in much better shape. We had a massive internal reorganisation and we changed a lot of the processes. And we're a lot more focused now on what it is we want to do. We didn't want to be in that situation where we're changing important elements as we're going along. Though we are changing things at the moment, they're merely effects rather than core gameplay."

"We have to make sure we don't frustrate the player this time by upholding reality too much, and as you've seen, you can now smash through everything"

We'll assume for a moment that *Driver*, should it couple its steadfast appeal with a genuinely thrilling fourth instalment, turns another of those tidy profits. If the modes of free-roaming, anarchic driving seen in both this series and *GTA* can be considered the genre's present, then what ideas does Reflections harbour as to its future? Is it unrealistic to expect anything beyond the further heightening of its realism?

"I think there's a lot more to do than that," says Edmonson. "One thing that we have done with this game, for example, is to make it so it never loads. It doesn't sound like a big deal but that's quite a complex problem, and the reason for doing that is purely for gameplay, so the player's always in the action. As an innovation it's relatively small beer, but we're at the end of PlayStation 2's life now and we're able to look at doing these sorts of things.

"Give us more power," he then adds with a smile, "and we'll think of something else."











Everybody Loves Takahashi

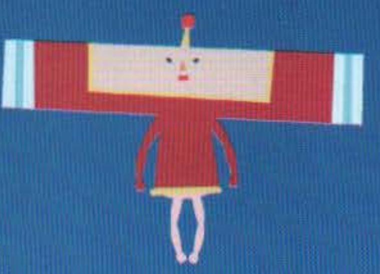
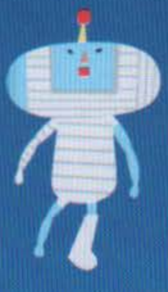
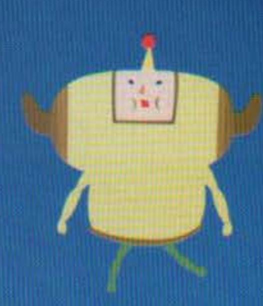
The success of Katamari Damacy has made its creator a star. But is it poetic justice or empty hype?

The ormulu-laden ballroom of London's Café Royal is an unlikely setting for an outbreak of game-geek sedition, but nonetheless there's a rustle of excited scandal as one game developer leans in to another, whisper-close. "Fucking ridiculous," he hisses. "He doesn't deserve the attention." He's referring to **Keita Takahashi**, creator of *Katamari Damacy*, and the game idea that he's pitching to a Game Developers Conference Europe session: a wifi-enabled, AI-enhanced, heated toy cat which could be used to manipulate house-bound grannies into a kind of competitive soup-making ARG. As he explains his notion he meows, to illustrate the function of the 'cat-waves' the toy will emit. His translator, gamely, mimics his meows. No matter how much you love *Katamari Damacy*, and therefore its creator, it's hard not to admit that the cynic in the back row has a point. But Takahashi, in two short years, has become so firmly established as the game developer's game developer and the hardcore gamer's game designer that speaking out against the rapturous reception he receives at these events looks like a particularly tart batch of sour grapes.

But just how do you accelerate from unknown newcomer, through cult hero, to toast of the establishment in the time it takes most developers to produce a single game? Back in 2003 *Katamari Damacy* was unknown, a demo disc given away at the Tokyo Game Show which was dismissed by many as a one-note wonder – a novelty game which no one would play for more than ten minutes. Then, some neat timing: just a fortnight after the game's release in Japan, and the early flurry of word-of-mouth from those whose interest had





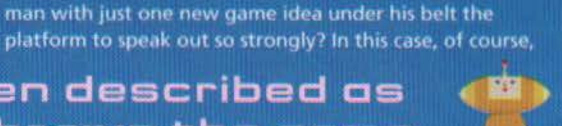




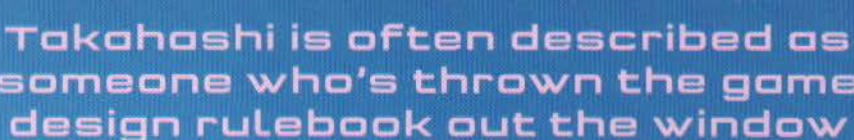




The two faces (well, one face and a hat) of *Katamari* merchandise. Xiola Azuthra has been snowed under with demand for her handmade hats, and fans have found it hard to resist the more mass-produced PSP pouch

been piqued at TGS, Takahashi presented the game at GDC's experimental game workshop. It was the perfect audience – curious-minded and enthusiastically evangelical – and word of *Katamari* started to spread in the development community. Namco, which hadn't expected the warmth of the western reception, organised a US release. By Christmas, the results of a simple litmus test were in: game developers, on the whole, don't get a lot of time to play videogames, and usually there's little pattern in what they choose when they do. But in 2005, no matter where you went or who you asked, it seemed there were only two games on the western developer playlist: *World Of WarCraft* and *Katamari Damacy*.





Takahashi is often described as someone who's thrown the game design rulebook out the window

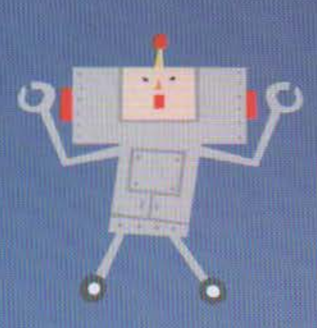
On the face of it, this shouldn't be surprising – the relentless delights of the Prince's adventure made converts wherever he went. But there's an odder side to the industry's love affair with Takahashi: whenever he talks about them, he insults them. Discussing the state of the industry at this year's GDCE, he expressed his distaste for sequels, lamented that most games were 'tainted with the stink of big business' and explained that he didn't bother playing current videogames because hardly any of them were fun. Nor is it a misunderstanding – Takahashi is quite blunt about where he feels the problem lies: "I find it very frustrating more developers aren't making more creative games. I can't understand it. One of the reasons I made *Katamari* was to say to people: 'Look, you can do this too'. But they don't. So it is very frustrating." Nor can developers hide behind the usual excuse of overly conservative publishers: "There are problems with the top people, with the business people, certainly, but even among the development staff, they don't have the new creative ideas. It's all just routine stuff."

This harsh attitude shouldn't be a recipe for a standing ovation from the very developers he's so dismissive of, and yet, somehow, it is. So what gives a man with just one new game idea under his belt the platform to speak out so strongly? In this case, of course, it is that one new game idea. Takahashi is often described as someone who's thrown the game design rulebook out the window, but it's closer to the truth to say that he's never read it. Consequently, trying to talk to him about the reasons why *Katamari Damacy* is so different from the bulk of game releases – and therefore so enthusiastically received by the development community – is like trying to grapple soap. Ask him what gave him the confidence to aim for emotional subtlety in his first project when so many designers still doubt videogaming's capacity to move its audiences, and his answer slips out of your grasp. "Do people think that?"



Keita Takahashi has already had to become used to the limelight, but he's more comfortable reading from his whimsical scripts than with being put on the spot













Although the first game had a very distinct aesthetic, the series has thrived on unpredictable stylistic twists. Other creators would more jealously guard the visual identity of their projects, but Takahashi and Namco seem happy to let *Katamari's* Prince run wild

he asks sadly. "I didn't realise." Or ask him how he held his nerve during his first two years at Namco, when he refused to attach himself to any of the company's ongoing projects, all of which he deemed too boring. "I suppose there was a little pressure," he shrugs. "But I didn't really mind." Enquire how he's found the experience of going from unknown, untested developer to global gaming darling in little over a year and he'll dismiss the question out of hand. "I'm not famous," he denies, glossing over the standing ovations he's used to commanding at events.

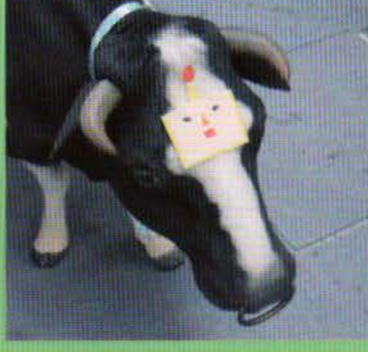
But no matter how uncomfortable he is talking about his status, it's these three factors that have made him such a symbol of success, although there's no doubt that the fascination started with the game. There are those who question *Katamari's* status as an innovator, pointing out that games have asked you to explore and collect often enough before, and that twin-stick control is nothing new. Nonetheless, nothing has ever blended environment navigation and tactical micro-improvisation as seamlessly as it does. Nothing has changed the status of the main character as dramatically from start to finish. Nothing has dared to evolve the player from pint-pot hero to ravenous world-scourer in the space of 20 minutes. Nothing integrates physical comedy so inseparably into the heart of the gameplay. Nothing has the total confidence to tell two only peripherally related stories at once, or to make such bold aesthetic choices and realise them so vividly across the gameworld, its soundtrack, its manuals, boxart and websites. This is a game that deserves its status as an icon of originality.

That might well be inspiration enough, but there's more to the Takahashi story than simple innovation. It's a tale that really starts with total bloody-mindedness.

An art graduate who had specialised in sculpture, Takahashi came to Namco because he'd decided that the most rewarding thing he could do, creatively, was to help people have fun. Videogame makers, it seemed to him, were in the business of selling fun, so he went to work for one. But once inside Namco, he despaired of the projects he found underway. Asked to pitch his own idea, he proposed *Katamari Damacy* (which had evolved from an initial idea which saw the Prince driving around town in cars made out of people's heads). This, he explains, was rejected and he was instructed to propose something new. Instead, he went away and prototyped his original idea. His determination kept his idea alive, and also allowed him time to handpick his team at











The series' Japanese website (www.katamaridamacy.jp) is a window into the world behind the game, with both late nights and amicable hijinks. Periodic outings see the Prince's face adorn all manner of unlikely objects











Takahashi believes that a game's manual is its best hope of explaining its spirit and gameplay to potential buyers, and that they should be available to browse in stores. His own are certainly packed with character

Namco. "I chose the best people there – people who I could see weren't doing their best work on other projects – they couldn't see what they were capable of. And if Namco had said yes right away, when I was new, then I wouldn't have known so well who to ask to work on the project." And once this team was assembled, his philosophical devotion to making people happy was extended to his new workmates. Any other approach baffles him. "If something isn't fun to make, why would it be fun to play?" he asks, and the results of his approach can be seen in the home photos on the *Katamari* website of outings to test the aerodynamics of his handmade King Of All Cosmos kite.



His talks, complete with *Katamari* props and idle doodles are as much theatrics as dry theory

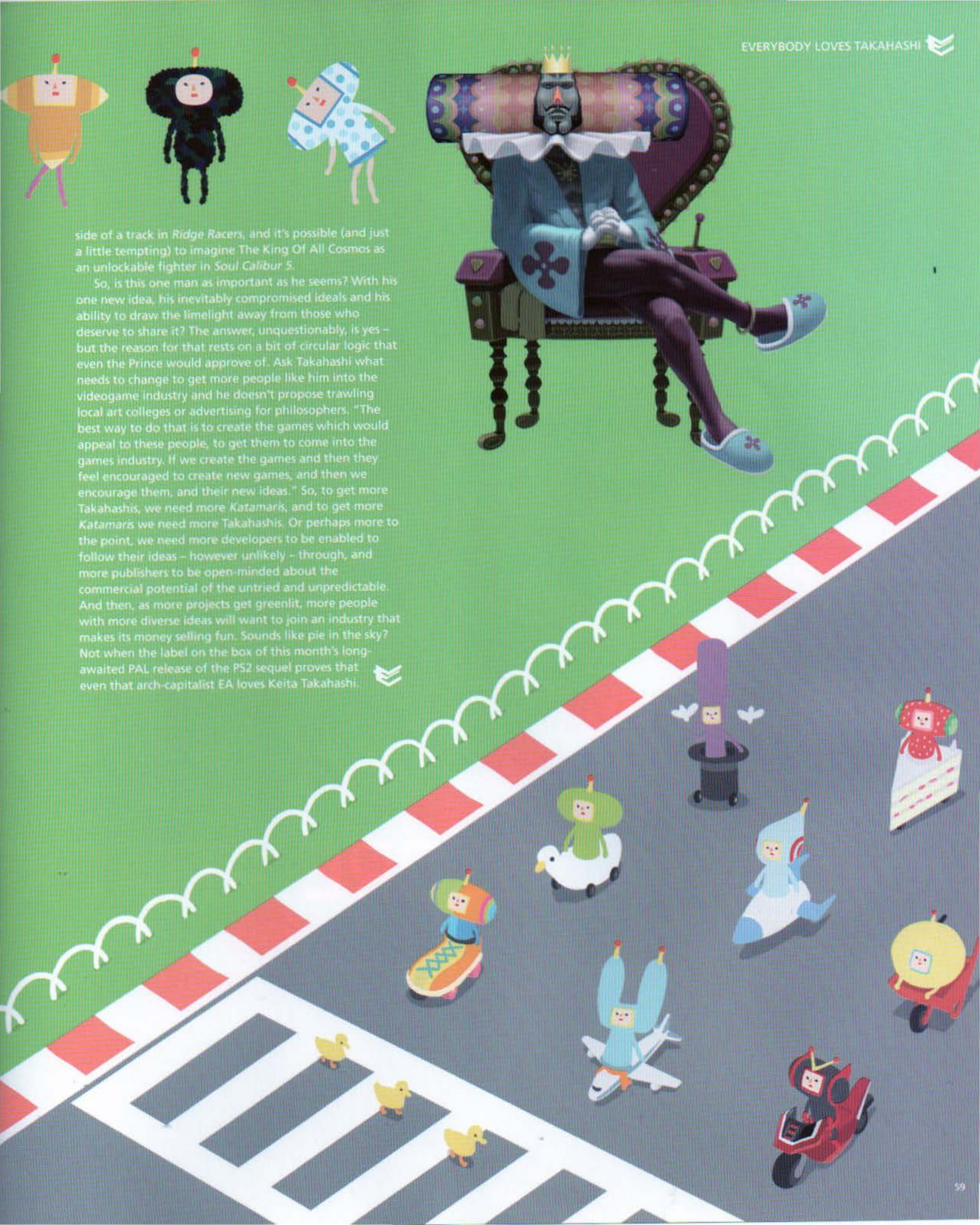


And if the quality of his game design work and the bullish ebullience of his working practices wasn't enough to inspire devotion, his new-found fame completes his standing as the model of a modern game developer. For all his discomfort when talking about it, it's clear he relishes taking the stage. His talks, complete with *Katamari* props and idle doodles, are as much theatrics as dry theory, and he's (rightfully) confident that roomfuls of people will be interested in his personal background and artistic philosophy. At a time when the well of celebrity developers seems to be going dry – or perhaps just going grey, as Molyneux, Miyamoto and Wright cement their position as elder statesmen rather than young turks – Takahashi is the best poster-boy gaming has for the idea that developers rather than publishers should be the name that people associate with their games, and that individuals rather than teams can be the focal point of a creative effort.

This triumvirate – a remarkable game, a maverick approach and a knack for publicity – is what's fuelled the *Katamari* phenomenon to the point where Takahashi can berate a roomful of whooping gamemakers for their shortcomings. And it's that combination that focuses attention on him when dozens of other developers are doing exactly the kind of things he calls for and perhaps doesn't notice are, and always have been, happening: Skip with the careful modulations of *Chibi Robo*'s strange story; Production Studio 4 with the completeness of vision of *Killer 7*; Inis (*Ouendan*), Double Fine (*Psychonauts*), Introversion (*Darwinia*), Quantic Dream (*Fahrenheit*), Toshio Iwai (*Electroplankton*), Giant/Traveller's Tales (*Lego Star Wars*), Nintendo (*Made In Wario*) – all studios staffed by developers deserving of just as much praise for their bold choices which further gaming's emotional range, open up new aesthetic frontiers and prioritise player happiness above all else.

So will Takahashi's reputation endure? He's often expressed his unflinching disdain of sequels, but Namco has moved on to the third *Katamari* (*Boku No Watashi No Katamari Damacy*, reviewed on page 88), and there's no word yet as to whether or not he's been able to stay true to his intentions and move on to another original project. Nor is that the only casualty caused when free-thinking meets its most fatal enemy: commercial success. Takahashi is clear he doesn't want *Katamari* merchandised – "I don't want to get into commercial items," he vows, while encouraging fans of the series to continue making their own contributions to its physical culture. "If people want to make something themselves, then I love that. I even have one of those *Katamari* hats that lady knitted [www.mad-teaparty.net/store/hats.html]!" But, for all his ideals, it's already possible to buy *Katamari* mobile phone flashers, and those who preordered *Boku No Watashi No Katamari Damacy* will receive a PSP slipcase in the shape of the Prince's head. Similarly, the world of *Katamari* is already leaking into other Namco games – the Prince already cameos at the





side of a track in *Ridge Racers*, and it's possible (and just a little tempting) to imagine The King Of All Cosmos as an unlockable fighter in *Soul Calibur 5*.

So, is this one man as important as he seems? With his one new idea, his inevitably compromised ideals and his ability to draw the limelight away from those who deserve to share it? The answer, unquestionably, is yes – but the reason for that rests on a bit of circular logic that even the Prince would approve of. Ask Takahashi what needs to change to get more people like him into the videogame industry and he doesn't propose trawling local art colleges or advertising for philosophers. "The best way to do that is to create the games which would appeal to these people, to get them to come into the games industry. If we create the games and then they feel encouraged to create new games, and then we encourage them, and their new ideas." So, to get more Takahashis, we need more *Katamaris*, and to get more *Katamaris* we need more Takahashis. Or perhaps more to the point, we need more developers to be enabled to follow their ideas – however unlikely – through, and more publishers to be open-minded about the commercial potential of the untried and unpredictable. And then, as more projects get greenlit, more people with more diverse ideas will want to join an industry that makes its money selling fun. Sounds like pie in the sky? Not when the label on the box of this month's long-awaited PAL release of the PS2 sequel proves that even that arch-capitalist EA loves Keita Takahashi.



SCORE ATTACK

SIX REVERED MUSICAL TALENTS COMPOSE THEIR THOUGHTS ON GAMING'S EVER CHANGING SOUND

"Interactive music is unique to games," declares **Chris Vrenna**, the cofounder of Nine Inch Nails who now splits his days between videogame score composition and touring with his new act, Tweaker. "Songs are songs: you can't pick and change the arrangement, mix, or instrumentation. In *Area 51*, we had several different tempos, and mixes of these that would switch up depending on what the player did, making the musical experience



unique for every player. It was challenging to write, but rewarding. I don't think every game would benefit from that approach but, if appropriate, it can be very effective."

Vrenna was one of the first artists, alongside former colleague Trent Reznor, to make inroads into gaming with more than just a back catalogue of popular tracks. The industry offers two avenues for those who dare – the adaptation of existing music to an interactive form and the generation *from* that interaction of something fresher and unpredictable. Take *God Of War* as an example of the former: a game with a score composed by four separate artists, each with differing degrees and varieties of experience in the field, learning different lessons through their involvement. Charged with scoring both explorative and combative scenes, acclaimed radio composer **Winifred Phillips** testifies to the project's grandeur:

"*God Of War* was an extraordinary circumstance, with a massive amount of epic-style music. Right after I was brought in on the project, I started studying art assets from the game, doing research into the kinds of world music techniques and instrumentation that Sony Santa Monica wanted to hear from this score, and reading reference materials on Greece and the ancient world. Sony handed down directives regarding the tracks they wanted me to compose, and then I wrote and recorded them.

"To understand why it needed multiple composers, however, you have to first understand the enormity of the project. The score was nearly three-and-a-half hours long. While it might be conceivable for one composer to write that much music for a game, the task would require a lot more time than was available. Using multiple

composers was the only way to get the job done. But it was a very unusual way to create a game score, and making sure the composers were writing music that conformed to a single unified style was, for Sony, an arduous task."

Even for artists whose primary raw materials are loops and demanufactured beats, a career jump to in-game composition is a severe proposal. For many, however, the stiff challenge is an acceptable – compelling, even – opportunity to explore something seldom seen in modern music: an uncharted frontier.

"That's really it, you know," concurs **Amon Tobin**, the genre-defying architect of some of Ninja Tune Records' most exciting releases and primary composer of the *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* soundtrack. "That was a chance to do something outside my own work, to be part of a bigger project that had its own agendas and objectives and to see if I could adapt. There was another



Having passed one kind of capacity test with *Chaos Theory*, Tobin quickly found himself another. "We really squeezed it on there," he reveals. "We were battling for space because I wanted to make sure there was variation. It was important to try and be a bit more organic about the whole thing"

Amon Tobin
Composer, *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*



Phillips has specific ideas as to how her voice can embellish an instrumental. For *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*, she sang "contrapuntal nonsense syllables at speed, expressing the kind of gymnastic countermelodies you'd normally hear from other instruments in the orchestra." In *God Of War*, meanwhile, she "used the voice to create ethereal and somber effects, relying on smoother and subtler vocal techniques"

aspect as well, in that it was great to be able to tackle a soundtrack but also to make something that was interactive, changing all the time depending on what the player does. I found it really interesting to try and make music that would go from one mood to another and be able to work in that way. I liked trying to find the different solutions to the problem, trying to find layers and transitions. The whole thing was a real eye-opener for me.

"I'm definitely part of that generation that grew up with home computers. I'm not particularly proud to say that I was one of those nerdy kids, but I had a Commodore 64 and I'd rent out games from the corner shop and, you know, tape them."

Tobin wasn't alone in marrying his characteristic urge to experiment with the black ops and blacker shadows of Sam Fisher's world. Time constraints meant that the so-called silent Brazilian remained especially so during the game's cinematics, leaving those extravagant showpieces – directed by Hollywood's Andrew Davis (The Fugitive, Under Siege) – available for the attention of a more indigenous, but no less flexible peer, **Jesper Kyd**.

"The emotion game composers were able to put into C64 scores is what attracted me to the medium," reveals Kyd – BAFTA award-winning composer for the *Hitman* series, *Freedom Fighters* and the upcoming *Gears Of War*. "The music was essentially still bleeps and bloops, but there was this amazing experimental approach that reminded me of artists such as Vangelis and Jean Michel Jarre. Once I got into the games industry, I wanted to apply a similarly progressive approach."

Videogame scores do indeed mark a deviation from the passive linearity to which recording artists have long been accustomed. But escape from those apparent constraints doesn't lead, as it may sound, to a forum for unbridled artistic expression. On the contrary; the precise direction, sequence and pace of game music (in-game music, at least) is only truly revealed at runtime, leaving its author, if anything, bound by a tighter set of rules than before. How does an artist such as Tobin adapt his existing method to a medium in which the music doesn't always bow to the will of either narrative or composer from one second to the next?

"That was one of the biggest problems," he reveals. "I had to make a piece of music that could go on forever or just a few seconds and still all work. Also, to have lots of musical elements that worked in contradictory ways but would still be able to service different needs in the game, still holding the job together as a theme. It was really a matter of determining how to split up these songs – would it be a series of different bits of music that were going to interpret the mood that existed before they were sewn together, or was it one large track split into various layers, each corresponding to a different level of stress before locking together with the rest to make a whole song?

"Ultimately, I went for the latter because I liked the idea of making a separate piece of music for each level of the game, with that piece of music having four layers of mood for different types of tension. It was a lot like making an arrangement with all of its dynamic parts, but with those parts being interchangeable and varying according to what the character did. You'd always have to come out of one part and into another smoothly without a huge step that sounded unnatural, so we worked a lot on transitions. They're not perfect – you could play it and there're parts where I'm wincing – but we got as close as we could."

"It's a whole new set of technical and artistic challenges," agrees Philips. "How do we create dramatic musical experiences without the benefit of having a beginning, a middle and an end? Music for games is usually created to play continuously, and the composer has no idea when it will begin or end within the context of the gameplay. Moreover, music for games needs to react smoothly and organically as the player shifts between different gameplay modes such as exploration, puzzle solving and combat."

"HOW DO WE CREATE DRAMATIC MUSICAL EXPERIENCES WITHOUT THE BENEFIT OF HAVING A BEGINNING, A MIDDLE AND AN END?"

THE HITMAN AND JESPER

IO's *Hitman* games are widely recognised as having some of the best soundtracks in the business. It's no surprise to learn that Jesper Kyd's creative method isn't a far cry from those of his Hollywood contemporaries: "The story and atmosphere of the games are what inspire me the most. I really try to get inside the head of Agent 47 and create music that is closely tied to his view of the world. The four different *Hitman* scores (including the upcoming *Hitman: Blood Money*) all convey his journey of discovery and I use a different approach for each score in order to ensure that they don't sound the same."

Challenging and exciting, these simultaneous flexibilities and demands nonetheless represent a mere midpoint on a wider spectrum of interactive composition. At one end, opposite to that of the ever-popular – among publishers at least – licensed track, lies the hypothetical point at



Winifred Phillips
Composer, *God Of War*



"The fusion of music and game will become more seamless in the future," says Mizuguchi. "Music from games will one day receive an Oscar or a Grammy." But what shape, you have to wonder, would gaming's first champion take? Tradition favours symphonic games like *God Of War* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* over Mizuguchi's arguably more entrancing beats

which music in games becomes truly modular, deferring more creative authority to the player than is retained by the composer. With music-based titles such as *Frequency* and *Guitar Hero* comes a suggestion of this extreme, but can anything more freeform realistically exist? By removing that bedrock of regimentation, do you not find yourself with an application rather than a game? Even **Tetsuya Mizuguchi** – a man classifiably obsessed with the relationship between play and performance – has shied from giving his

response' with the game-specific structures of 'stock and release' and 'risk and reward' to create chemistry. Basically, the more complex the game design is, the less enjoyable the game-music relationship can be."

But as significant as this relationship is to those at the progressive edge, it will remain a more redundant issue for those with more

"YOU PLAY ONE OF THESE MAPS FOR SEVERAL HOURS – THE THOUGHT OF BEING LOCKED IN A THEME FOR THAT AMOUNT OF TIME IS HORRIFYING"

audience that uppermost level of control. Titles such as *Rez*, *Lumines* and *Space Channel 5* see the player, at best, as a sequencer rather than a composer, their actions seldom fashioning anything more than superficial layers of percussion.

"If you're given complete freedom to compose," Mizuguchi proffers, "then there's no need for a game. The significance of the existence of *Rez* and *Lumines* is to provide a musical experience otherwise unattainable in daily life. I'm always thinking about how to mix the musical structure of 'call and

traditional concerns: cinematics and title screens, for instance, with melodies written to linger in the subconscious. Was the plan with *Chaos Theory* ever to bind it to such musical signatures?

"Yeah, we thought about it at the beginning," says Tobin, "because there was going to be some music for the cinematics. But in the end, I ducked out of those and, really, you play one of these maps and you play it for several hours – the thought of being locked in a theme for that amount of time is horrifying. As much as classic games have that running through them, I wanted it to be a more subtle thing where I'm just emphasising what's going on rather than taking over the mood completely. With something like a catchy ditty in the background – it'd drive you mad."

Hence the development of audioscapes as opposed to themes: purposefully muted and stripped of consistent harmony, targeting the gut rather than the mind


Chris Vrenna
Composer, *Alice, Doom 3, Quake 4*



VOICE OF REASON

Upcoming scores such as that for *Ninety-Nine Nights* prove that vocals are still a possibility for videogame music, albeit seldom embraced. "I think vocal tracks can be very powerful, but they should only be used in a project that can benefit from that sound," suggests Phillips. "I've worked on projects where no vocals were used, nor should they have been. Other projects were practically screaming for vocal tracks. It depends on the story being told. That being said, the voice is a remarkably elastic and expressive instrument, and I think it can be used in many more ways than it has been."

and contradictory in their simultaneous subtlety and power.

"Each game has its own tone and voice," suggests Vrenna. "As a music composer, your job is to try to capture the game designers' vision. American [McGee – whose *Alice* project represented one of the composer's first in the gaming sphere] wanted an old yet otherworldly-sounding score. Many of *Alice*'s weapons were toys, so I came up with pieces of music based on sampling actual antique toy instruments, and then wrote themes that sounded like nursery rhymes. Id, however, doesn't like much actual music within game levels, so I created a ton of short loopable samples for *Doom III* that we called 'musical sound design'. These fade up and down throughout."

Some might argue, with the likes of 8bit maestro Rob Hubbard in mind, that the availability of such high-calibre production jettisoned something precious in the chip-derived tunes of old, born as they were during times when the digital recompilation and reproduction of licensed tracks was practically impossible.

"I don't agree with that," Vrenna contests. "There is no substitute for a good melody, whether in a song or in a score. I think having the technology to create better produced scores enhances the game player's experience. It comes down to what you do with what's available. There will always be well-written music with no production quality and well-produced, great-sounding music that's poorly written."

"I think it goes across the board," Tobin suggests. "It isn't so much an issue of technology as of composition itself. You look at movies: how many of those are made now where there's a composer doing the whole soundtrack? It's all about the compilation albums and the marketing, or at least it's going down that route."

He speaks the truth, for certain genres at least. For every hodgepodge of EA Trax there's a 'From And Inspired By' or a 'Featuring Exclusive Songs' banner rolled across a movie soundtrack: an OST as they're deceptively known. And if it's a debasement of the art we're talking about then, as Tobin claims, it is omnipresent. But it's not absolute. There's still a need to embolden those moments of drama that happen to fall between the raging melees and upbeat montages. Score composition is and will remain equally topical for both converging industries – movies and games – making the difference in recognition gained by their respective composers a phenomenon worth questioning. Does this gulf, we ask Kyd, highlight game music's inferiority?


Jesper Kyd
Composer, *Hitman, Freedom Fighters*



It's no surprise to find the chip tunes of the Commodore 64 influencing many of today's game musicians, forced as their own composers were to innovate within a restrictive technological space. Tobin specifically cites Elite's C64 conversion of Capcom's *Ghosts 'N Goblins* as an inspiration, its score by 8bit composer Mark Cooksey actually adding to the spirit of the already memorable arcade original

Tetsuya Mizuguchi
Designer, *Rez*, *Space Channel 5*

"Now that I live in LA and have met the 'real' Hollywood," he replies, "I have found out that people there embrace unique, interesting music that dares to be different. This was a big surprise to me, since I often hear game developers ask for the 'Hollywood sound', meaning something more traditional. For a composer to make it in Hollywood, he needs to have his own style. In the games industry, however, it's a composer that can copy John Williams or Hans Zimmer who is going to find the work."

So is it in fact the fault of developers, then, rather than composers? Is part of the reason for many games having unambitious scores the fact that many modern games fail – as movie critic Roger Ebert recently suggested – to achieve the same calibre of drama and tone as other storytelling media?

"No," says Kyd. "There must be an ambition in the composer to do something really interesting, dramatic and different. If I only did what I was asked to do my soundtracks would sound very different and much more generic. I fight to get all these crazy ideas in there. The scores that dare to be different are the scores we remember. Think about First Blood, Blade Runner, Predator, 1492, Gladiator, Star Wars."

Vrenna also recognises the issue, but remains optimistic. The situation, he claims, won't be a lasting one.

"This is an issue we game composers wonder about," he declares. "I think game composers are becoming more and more recognised and will become even more so as the game industry as a whole grows further, reaching more of the mainstream. One sign of this is that you're seeing more movie composers scoring games, so they do see the medium as a valuable musical avenue."

And how much significance should we attach, on the publisher's side, to Ubisoft Montreal's readiness to employ an artist like Amon Tobin and give him total creative freedom over the music in their flagship title? "I think it's going to be a fairly fleeting moment," Tobin replies, "and people should maximise that ability while it's there. It can't be too long before something gives. You've got computer game companies buying out publishing companies now, giving them easier access to their rights, so they're probably not going down the long-term route of hiring many composers."

"At first," says Mizuguchi, "record companies had a big problem with having their music chopped up and remixed by game players. When creating *Rez* we looked for artists who liked the idea and approached them directly – the result was a game to be reckoned with, one that made it easier to work with Mondo Grosso when creating *Lumines*. If there's something that seems impossible, take one step at a time and it'll eventually become possible. It's a process that's really important, but it's also important to ensure that it serves the interests of both parties, not just one."

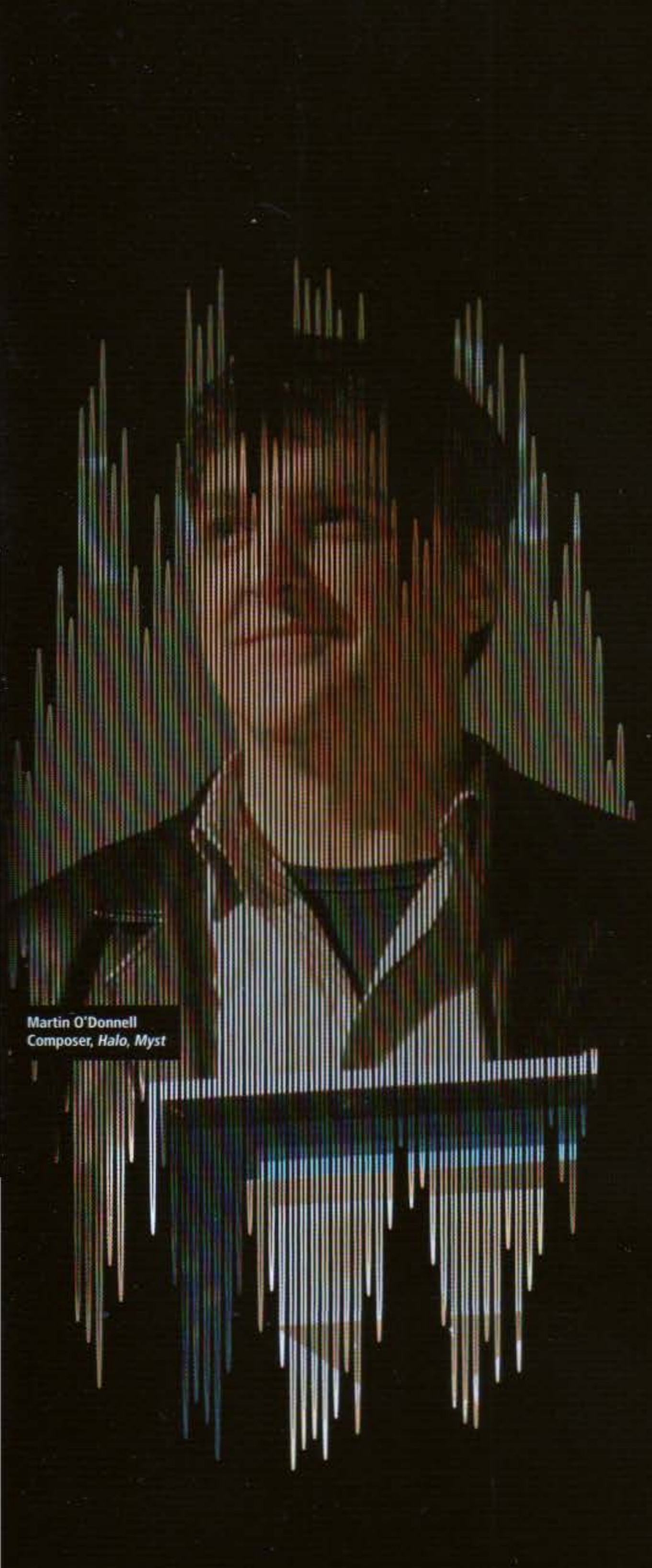


Akira Yamaoka's scores for the *Silent Hill* series are a further example of music's evolution in this interactive medium. Blending lyrical melodies with monstrous ambience, they provide a convenient overview of modern game music's potential for both linear theme and dramatic interaction



Q&A MARTIN O'DONNELL

Few videogame composers attempt to establish a signature theme for their characters or story, and those who do so seldom leave a lasting aural impression. With the *Halo* games, however, Bungie audio director **Martin O'Donnell** and working partner Michael Salvatori (with a little help from Steve Vai) did exactly that, consummating the grand space opera with a deep and harmonious score. With his work on Wideload's *Stubbs The Zombie* hitting US shelves last month, we asked O'Donnell for a brief status report.



Martin O'Donnell
Composer, *Halo*, *Myst*

How significant a hurdle is it for composition in games to create scores that resonate to the same degree as, say, a John Williams movie theme?
I don't approach scoring for games any differently than I approach scoring for other mediums; creating scores that resonate is always a priority. However, I have never wanted music to get in the way or draw attention to itself at the wrong time. Wall-to-wall scores and themes that occur at inappropriate moments are intrusive, and so most of the music I have composed for games is underscore – not heavily thematic. Most of the time there is no music at all.

"I DON'T APPROACH SCORING FOR GAMES ANY DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHER MEDIUMS; CREATING SCORES THAT RESONATE IS ALWAYS A PRIORITY"

How does your working relationship with Michael Salvatori function when tackling a new project? Are two heads really better than one when putting together something as personal as a dramatic score?
Music is an extremely personal creation, but there are stages in the process when it can be fantastic to let someone else enter. I'm the one closest to the development and implementation of music for games: I work with the rest of the team and come up with a vision for the music. Since 2000, Mike and I have lived in cities 1,800 miles apart, and we haven't been able to collaborate side by side. However, technology has allowed us to get our heads together a lot of the time.

Are you able to say whether the music that features in *Halo* the game will be carried over to Halo the movie?
At this point, a director for the Halo movie hasn't been chosen. That person is usually the person who decides on the music and the composer. Obviously, I would love to see some of my themes in the movie, and even be involved in its production in some way. That's not a decision that I get to make. Certainly I believe that *Halo*'s music has become part of the public's understanding of what makes *Halo Halo*. I would think that the equity of its music would be useful.

As someone who, at the time, was involved in composition for other media, what was it about the *Myst* project that lured you into signing on?
I always loved playing computer and console games. Until *Myst*, I didn't really see a place in that medium for someone like myself, who worked with high-end audio production. That doesn't mean that there weren't amazing professionals doing amazing audio for games, just that technology until then still limited things like voice acting, multiple audio channels, recorded music and so forth. Suddenly, with *Myst*, I saw that the potential of integrating real actors, music recordings, and sound design into a more cinematic approach to production had finally arrived.

Whose job is it to attract greater talent and quality to the world of videogame score composition: existing game composers or publishers and developers?
It's incumbent upon game developers and publishers to attract and retain the top talent in the entertainment industry. But a top film composer isn't necessarily a good choice for working on game scores – not unless they're also a consumer of games. The games industry is a relatively new business in the overall entertainment industry and is therefore still experiencing growing pains. There's plenty of room to grow aesthetically and technically. There's also plenty of room to grow from a business standpoint, in terms of respecting and nurturing creative talent.

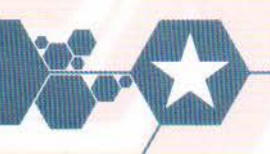

Illustration: Ben Miners

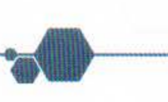


THE EDGE AWARDS 2005

What will 2005 be remembered for once the hardware launch dust settles and the January sales begin?

Everyone had the right to expect this year to be a gaming great. As one generation rolls to a close, the last year of the outgoing machines is expected to exhibit a last hurrah of technical flair and creative ingenuity. For all that new projects will continue to service the vast intalled bases, this is the year for forward-looking teams to show off the results of their mastery of the current hardware before jumping ship for the next. And they didn't disappoint. Every system had at least one game that would have seemed inconceivable at launch, which meant that the most saddening thing about the new batch of consoles is that we may never fully see what any of the old – particularly Microsoft's Xbox – was truly capable of. Add to that the pleasures of two new, and so very different, handhelds finding their feet and a PC market that is learning from console gaming's accessibility as surely as it is technically outstripping its performance, and it's easy to see why this year's awards were the source of so many amicably vicious disagreements. In the end, however, the sheer excellence of the winners could not be denied. Indeed, if the only gaming you do in 2006 is to play through the titles listed over the next few pages, you'll find that, again, you'd have a year that is a gaming great.

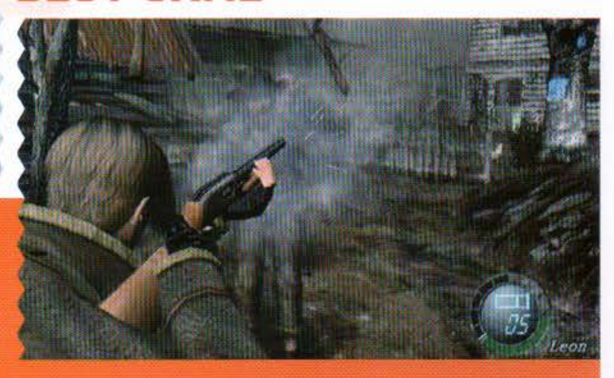






THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST GAME



RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT: **GC, PS2** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** DEVELOPER: **PRODUCTION STUDIO 4**

When you look back upon a year like 2005, consider a game like *Resident Evil 4* and find yourself saying, "Wow... yep, that was *so* nearly a ten," you know that you have your game of the year. It's when you find yourself reminiscing with others over all of the elements that make it truly great that helps cement its stature: what about *that* bit with the chair? How about when you realise you can catch fish? And on they go. As we originally noted in our review, it's the game's filmic quality that gives it its ultimate capacity to deliver non-stop entertainment from start to finish: you know that you're only ever a few steps away from the next big thrill, and, like the best page-turner of a novel you've ever read, you simply cannot wait to see what's lying around the corner. So few games nowadays are so dense, so packed with things to see and do. Fewer still are rendered with such artistry.

RUNNER-UP

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**



It's flawed, yes. And, yes, it's derivative. But by creating a beautifully rich world, and making accessible the arcane mechanics which drive more sophisticated MMOs, *WOW* lured millions of sightseers to its hazy shores and few could tear themselves away from the adventure that unfolded.

RUNNER-UP

BATTLEFIELD 2

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**



The game that had PC owners asking if next-gen had come early, *Battlefield 2* affirmed DICE's reputation as one of the best engine builders in the industry. Enough strategic variety was packed into the large-scale skirmishes and massive-scale environments to rout any potential opposition.

THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST INNOVATION



NINTENDO DS

MANUFACTURER: **NINTENDO**

This time last year, Nintendo's DS was an innovative piece of hardware with bags of unproven potential. This year, it's proven its ability to confound expectations at every step. At the development level, there are the lower production costs that allow the likes of Inis and Masaya Matsuura to reach new audiences. At retail, it's seeing DS games command long shelf-lives, their popularity gradually gathering steam through good word of mouth rather than crashing out of sight after the first week of release. Then there's the marketing, enlisting the likes of Bill Oddie to pull in another innovation – a genuinely diversified demographic. And, of course, there are the games, putting brain-training conundrums and touch-controlled inventions alongside tried-and-tested classics. All Nintendo needs to do now is prove it can translate what is still a mostly Japanese phenomenon to the wider market.

RUNNER-UP

ANTIGRAV

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**



For all the excitement over Revolution, Harmonix remains the only developer to have delivered a full game that you control purely with your body. A remarkable technical achievement, it's also a piece of pure and simple magic, bestowing upon its players the power of flight.

RUNNER-UP

JUNGLE BEAT

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Not just the best-looking 2D game in an age, nor just the best old-school platformer in an age, *Jungle Beat* is an object lesson in how a smartly designed control scheme can breathe new life into an old idea. The very opposite of a gimmick, it proved the perfect blend of old and new.







THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST VISUAL DESIGN



KILLER 7

FORMAT: **GC, PS2** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**

Not many games prove as captivating from a single screenshot as this, the most agressively styled of Capcom's five not-quite-to-be GC exclusives. But that immediate, toon-shaded impact belied the game's real sophistications. These are visuals in smart, subtle service to both gameplay and story, delivering the punchy solidity that a pure shooter needs as well as the abstracted hints of hallucination that the central conundrum – real adventure or Harman's corroded imaginings? – required. But what *Killer 7* does better than has ever been done before is take advantage of the total control of perspective that an on-rails game gives: using the fact that the game could know at all times where the player was looking, where he'd been, where he was going, and even how fast he was likely moving to create a visual rhythm of colour and shape that the very best fairground rides can still only aspire to.

RUNNER-UP

RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT: **GC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **PRODUCTION STUDIO 4**



Like *Half-Life 2*, *Resident Evil 4* is the game that keeps on giving: when you think you've seen all that it has to offer up, it delivers once more, again and again. From the mundane to the fantastical, its art team renders a world we only dreamed of when clunking through the first *Res Evil* title.

RUNNER-UP

SOTC

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Shadow Of The Colossus is a game designed around the idea of removing anything that isn't necessary, and the same purity shows in the visuals. Finding a richness in its restraint, and an emotional impact in its eerie stillness, less has rarely produced a more spectacular whole.

THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST AUDIO DESIGN



KILLER 7

FORMAT: **GC, PS2** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**

It shouldn't come as a surprise to see *Killer 7* sitting side by side for these awards. From the first moments of the game it's clear that the aural world has been given as much aesthetic consideration as the visual one, and that the two are utterly interdependent for their effect. In a similar way to the game's art style, the music seesaws between pastiches of traditional game music, which serve to bolster the sense that this is a straight adventure, and an uneasy, disjointed cacophony which could only belong inside Harman's troubled mind. It's also hard to remember a time when music, sound effects, voice casting and voice production were approached so holistically. It's rare enough to hear each done well; rarer still to hear them weaved together into one soundscape which integrated so effectively with both the gameplay and the story. The acid test? Close your eyes and you can still hear it.

RUNNER-UP

RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT: **GC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **PRODUCTION STUDIO 4**



When Capcom went to all that trouble creating cinematic action, was it going to skimp on audio? Of course not. A magnificent soundtrack, often understated but freqently urgent and always capable of plucking out some sort of reaction from the player, ensured this stood out in 2005.

RUNNER-UP

DARWINIA

FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **INTROVERSION**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



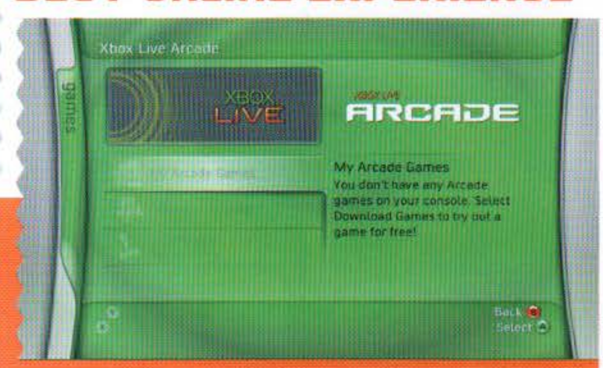
For those who did their bit in liberating Darwinia, the memory that's seared on their minds is the sound: rarely has anything so awful been so wonderful, the shrieking, scraping hiss of the virii floating over the gentle ambience of one of the year's finest soundtracks.






THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST ONLINE EXPERIENCE



XBOX LIVE ARCADE

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**

"We have the best launch line-up of any console ever," trumpets J Allard, and debate will rage as to whether or not he's right. But debate won't rage about the value of having *Wik*, *Mutant Storm*, *Gauntlet* and *Geometry Wars* sitting waiting for you when your attention wanes from *PDO* or *PGR*. Smoothly implemented and well-edited, Microsoft's suite of download titles has genuinely widened the appeal of its console, as well as providing a lifeline for small developers who would otherwise be excluded from the hi-def generation. While on Xbox the service seemed a little self-contradictory, 360's free Live service and communication tools means that there's no conflict – and huge potential – behind the contrast between father playing a spot of backgammon with his brother in Canada and son dessicating his eyes in a quest for the world *Mutant Storm* hi-score record.

RUNNER-UP

WIPEOUT PURE

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (LIVERPOOL)**



Just being a sumptuously good game would have been enough of a launch-game hallmark, but *Pure* delivered on its promise of making the PSP's connectivity count. Alongside straight ad-hoc multiplayer, the support for new tunes, tracks and craft has made owning *Pure* a delight.

RUNNER-UP

POCKET KINGDOMS

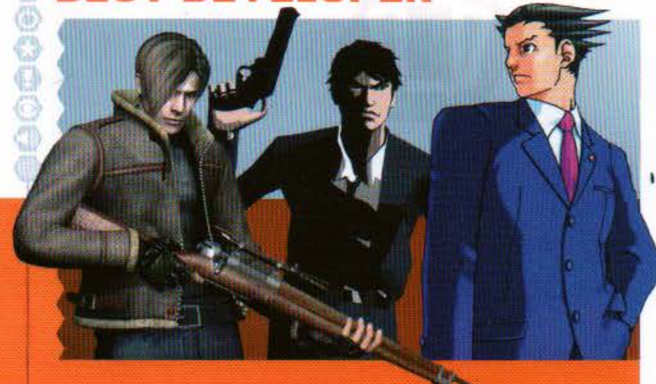
FORMAT: **N-GAGE**
PUBLISHER: **NOKIA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



It wasn't the greatest of games, but the world's first mobile MMO was a smart and vibrant solution to the problem of how to integrate virtual adventures into the reality of the daily grind. The ambitious website support, complete with AI newscaster, perfectly rounded out the process.

THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST DEVELOPER



PRODUCTION STUDIO 4

GAMES: **RESIDENT EVIL 4, KILLER 7, PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY**

When Production Studio 4 announced its plans for a GameCube-exclusive killer five, it seemed to good to be true. And, as the months progressed, there appeared to be sound reason for suspicion. *Killer 7* seemed to flounder, *P.N.03* disappointed, exclusivity gave way to crossplatform. But in the end (with assistance from Grasshopper Manufacture on *Killer 7*) its highly ambitious plan didn't just meet, but far exceeded even the most optimistic expectations. Capcom as a whole has had an impressive development roster in 2005, not least with *Devil May Cry 3* and *Shadow Of Rome*, but it's a rather unfair playing field to pit individual studios against the might of an industry giant. Consequently, for the singularity of its visions, the courage of its design decisions and the overall excellence of its execution, it's more than appropriate to single out Shinji Mikami and his teams.

RUNNER-UP

UBISOFT (MONTREAL)

GAMES: **SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY, FAR CRY INSTINCTS, POP: WARRIOR WITHIN, KING KONG (360)**



There's barely space here to outline what this enormous studio has accomplished in the last year, but its skill with conversions like *Far Cry*, its enhancements of a series like *Splinter Cell* and its increasing assurance with games like *Prince Of Persia* make it a modern-day powerhouse.

RUNNER-UP

HARMONIX

GAMES: **EYETOY: ANTIGRAV, KARAOKE REVOLUTION PARTY, GUITAR HERO**



In an odd parallel with Sony's own Studio London, Harmonix forged ahead in 2005 with games which created, and then near perfected, their own niches. The majestic elation of *Guitar Hero*, the total immersion of *Antigrav* and the inspired fusion of *KRP* add up to a phenomenal year's work.

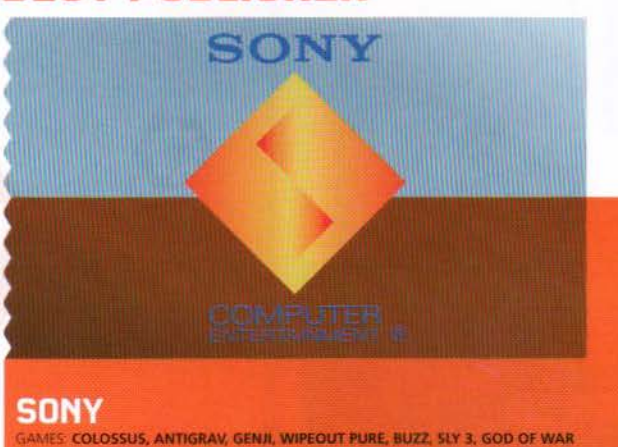






THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST PUBLISHER



SONY

GAMES: **COLOSSUS, ANTIGRAV, GENJI, WIPEOUT PURE, BUZZ, SLY 3, GOD OF WAR**

Sony's publishing division has always shown a laudable attitude to being a platform holder, sponsoring interesting and valuable projects which might have floundered if left reliant on thirdparty publishers. This year has proved no exception, putting its muscle behind studios like Game Republic and Relentless to ensure that the PS2 had a steady stream of games showcasing the machine's strengths. It may be the oldest kid on the block, but games like *Genji* and *God Of War* have proved that there is still more to be wrung out of its architecture, and innovations like *Antigrav* and *Buzz* have shown that Sony still has an aggressive determination to widen the appeal of the world's most popular console. For those ready with accusations of focusing on the mainstream came projects like *Sly 3* and *Rise Of The Kasai*, and among some PSP disappointments came some of its strongest titles.

RUNNER-UP

EA

GAMES: **ODDWORLD: STRANGER'S WRATH, BURNOUT REVENGE, BLACK & WHITE 2, BATTLEFIELD 2**



While games like *Medal Of Honor: European Assualt* continue to dent its reputation as a developer, EA has a peerless record in using its muscle to support external projects. Digital Illusions, Oddworld Inhabitants and Lionhead have all shone under EA's vast umbrella.

RUNNER-UP

NINTENDO

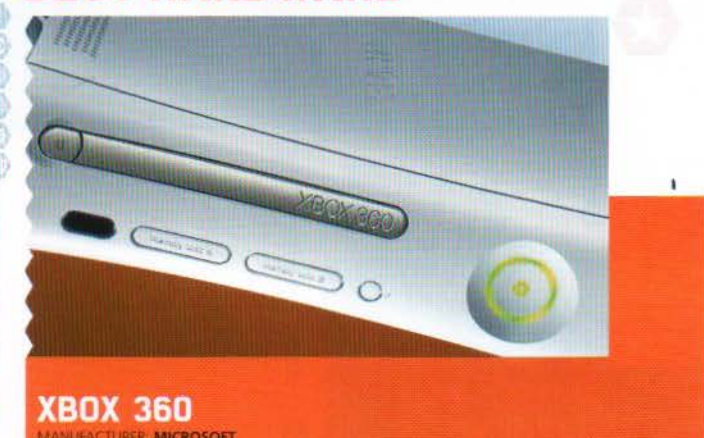
GAMES: **ELECTROPLANKTON, OUENDAN, BATTALION WARS, CHIBI ROBO, ANOTHER CODE**



Alongside its own, tradionally excellent, in-house games, Nintendo has had a strong year supporting external projects which broadened the appeal of their consoles. *Battalion Wars* proved an enouragingly successful western collaboration, while *Chibi* was brilliantly retooled.

THE 2005 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST HARDWARE



XBOX 360

MANUFACTURER: **MICROSOFT**

Microsoft may be militant about its blend of 'software, hardware and services', but there's little arguing to be done with the hardware itself. With its clean curves and unified design approach it's stylistically an interesting leap forward. But that isn't at the expense of function: indeed, its precise, beautifully calibrated controller alone was a strong candidate for this award. The arrival of wireless joypads as standard, alongside smaller innovations like being able to turn the console on and off from the sofa also substantially improve the playing experience. And, as far as what's under the hood is concerned, it's clear that the launch titles have only scratched the surface in terms of what this hardware is capable of projecting on to high-definition displays. We're hoping, of course, that Microsoft can give this iteration more than four years to realise its substantial potential.

RUNNER-UP

PSP

MANUFACTURER: **SONY**



Still humblingly beautiful to look at, quibbles about the compromised Square button and the utility of the analogue slider have detracted from the handheld's astonishing achievements in terms of processing power, screen fidelity and enormous wifi online potential.

RUNNER-UP

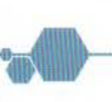
GAMEBOY MICRO

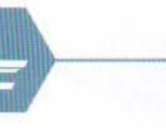
MANUFACTURER: **NINTENDO**



Cynical it may be, but the Micro is perhaps the most irresistable of the GBA's iterations. Understated and classy, games have never looked better than on its rich, sharp screen and the pleasure of finding it forgotten in your pocket when your train's been delayed is pure joy.





THE ALTERNATIVE EDGE AWARDS 2005



It's tradition to give gongs to the big hitters, but gaming is often about the little things that usually get forgotten. Here are 16 that helped to make gaming great in 2005

SEEING DOUBLE
PSYCHONAUTS

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MAJESCO**
DEVELOPER: **DOUBLE FINE**



It had wit and charm and invention, but *Psychonauts* was at its best when it was integrating story, interaction and visuals together with unique comic flair. The best touch was the button which let you see how NPCs saw *you*, a funny, insightful glimpse into what games think of gamers.

A BUG'S LIFE
BOILING POINT

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP SHADOWS**



Without question the funniest game of the year. We can forgive them the physics, the crashes, the car handling, the repeated terrain, the non-AI, the loading tunnels, the fragile buildings, enormous folders and belligerant briefcases, but we can't forgive them for fixing the floating jaguars.

BUSINESS MODEL
GIZMONDO

HARDWARE: **GIZMONDO**
MANUFACTURER: **TIGER TELEMATICS**



There are those who despair of the modern, corporate game industry, with its PR armies who control every story with an iron, scandal-stifling soul-draining grip. Those are the people who owe Tiger Telematics a stiff drink for bringing back happy memories of more chaotic times.

BOOGIE FRIGHT
FAHRENHEIT

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM**



David Cage's emotionally mature adventure opened with a boldly postmodern tutorial fronted by Cage himself. But it ends, after hours of arcane torment and ambitious dialogue, with a preposterous unlockable dance-off, where heroes, villains and creator alike get their groove on.

LINE DANCING
FORZA MOTORSPORT

FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM FORZA**



Driving games are usually cited as the genre where there's the least scope for innovation, but *Forza's* intelligently responsive racing line provided a new gameplay dynamic, and a powerful teaching tool and a distinctive visual signature in one brilliantly simple bit of fresh thinking.

WATERTIGHT
THE CONTROLLER

FORMAT: **REVOLUTION**
MANUFACTURER: **NINTENDO**



The controller itself was, of course, one of the highlights of the year, but what made it all the sweeter was the lack of any leaks. It's a rare trick to pull off these days, and laying eyes (and hands) on it for the first time, with no idea what to expect, was a proper, old-fashioned videogame thrill.

BREATH OF LIFE
STEAM

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VALVE**



Not an award for the whole service, whose implentatation and implications are still evolving, but for Valve's emergence as an online publisher, providing a structured outlet for innovative titles like Mark Healey's *Rag-Doll Kung-Fu* and Introversion's dazzling *Darwinia*.

BIRD FLEW
CONDEMNED

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH**

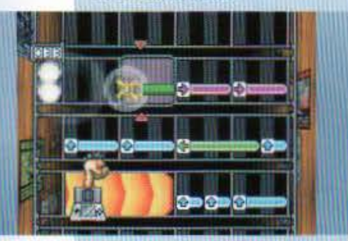


At a stroke, Monolith has ended years of running gags about the futility and pointlessness of collectables. The minute you realise you're being asked to amass diseased bird corpses and 'bits of metal' to up your score is the moment you realise you'll never mock a Rare game ever again.




ZERO TOLERANCE
BAND BROTHERS

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



There is a moment in every *Daigasso: Band Brothers* session when someone picks the *F-Zero* medley, and there's a moment in every performance – the same moment – when it breaks down into chaos. Never has being rubbish at a game been so reliably entertaining.

PRESS START
GAME EDITORIAL

SOURCES: **BBC TV, RADIO AND ONLINE; THE GUARDIAN; THE ECONOMIST**





Colin and Edith, The Economist, features on gaming vocabulary and MMO economics: mainstream game coverage improved notably in 2005. But these crucial pioneers have an unusually heavy responsibility for accuracy and insight as they interpret gaming for the masses.

LEGENDARY
GOD OF WAR

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **SONY SANTA MONICA**



The game itself was a highlight of the year – bold, ballsy and dramatic – but its suite of extras points forward to a time when the creative processes behind a game are taken as seriously by publishers as those behind films are taken by DVD-makers. If only every game was as well represented.

STUPID AS HELL
WORLD OF WARCRAFT

FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**



Not an award for the game, nor for a player of the game, nor even for the wonderful video he made, but for the incredible sense of solidarity that the Leroy Jenkins stunt engendered as *WOW* hit the tipping point and became a mainstream in-joke you could share with strangers.

RACING ONLINE
MARIO KART DS

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



A re-release of *PSO* and the handholding charms of *Homeland* do not an online service make. Which means that, with 45 per cent of *MK* players using WFC, Nintendo has catapaulted from having the worst online ratio to one that even Microsoft would envy. Who'd have thought?



NET GAIN
DEVBLOGS

AUTHORS: **HIDEO KOJIMA, DAVID JAFFE, YOSHIKI OKAMOTO, RON GILBERT, RAGNAR TORNQUIST**



The signal-to-noise ratio of the internet continues to worsen, but the signals, when you find them, are strong and clear. The best of the new trend of developer blogs are forthright, funny and occasionally stunningly personal insights into the lives of the people who make your games.

ANIMAL MAGIC
STUBBS THE ZOMBIE

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ASPYR/THQ**
DEVELOPER: **WIDELOAD**



Forget 'Be The Zombie'. How about 'Be The Fag-Smoking, Hat-Toting Zombie Riding A Sheep That Handles Like A Warthog To The Strains Of A Delicate '50s Pastiche Before Dismounting, Patting It As A Thank-You And Watching In Flat, Undead Disbelief As It Topples Over, Dead'?



ROCK SOLID
GUITAR HERO

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **RED OCTANE**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**



The game, of course, is great, but it would be worthless without its controller. Handsome, robust, and – crucially – not embarassingly toy-like, the rock-salute-enducing tilt sensor is more than we had any right to expect and more, arguably, than any of us deserve.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Project Gotham Racing 3



Forced in-car view Live events and supercharged Atom chases through Las Vegas are the current fashion, though the gruelling platinum medal crusade can't be far behind.
360, MICROSOFT

Mutant Storm Reloaded



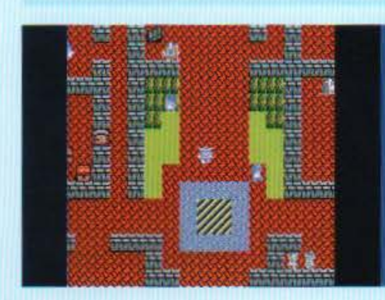
Debates are already raging about which is the better shooter – this or *Geometry Wars*? – but being spoilt for choice has rarely been this exhaustingly pleasurable.
360, MICROSOFT

Guitar Hero



A rare last-gen game to hold its own this month. Weirdly, it can be even more effective than karaoke in bringing out another side of those around you.
PS2, RED OCTANE

Games ancient and modern
In praise of sticking with the past



Looking back at the original leaves no doubt about the impact of *Dragon Quest VIII*'s facelift. However, can the same be said of the gameplay?

It's a conundrum art historians are used to. When repairing a damaged painting, or renovating an old building, do you restore it to how it originally would have been – often brash, gaudy and unpalatable to the modern eye – or to how it ought to look after several centuries of carefully maintained ageing? It's a conundrum because there's no right answer, each approach being as artificial as the other, but whichever is chosen has a substantial impact on our understanding of the past.

And it's no different in gaming. This month hails updates of *Dragon Quest*, *Perfect Dark* and *Ridge Racer*. Each is facing the usual sequel challenge of balancing the expectations of the old fans with the hopes of the new. There's an answer to the conundrum, although it's one that's easier to spout than it is to implement: a sequel should stay true to the intentions of the original, not its execution. It's where *Ridge Racer* scores so well, taking the exuberance and style of the original, but reworking it for a new era. And it's where *Perfect Dark Zero* falls down, staying so true to the mechanics of the original that it fails to respond to the inventive refinements the genre has since undergone.

But what about a series where the fans don't want the spirit preserved at the expense of the mechanics? They want those mechanics, even if they're now anachronistic and even if they betray the original game's intentions to carve out new ground. What do you do, in short, if you're updating *Dragon Quest*? It's a game whose basic interactions have become museum pieces, ageing structures which are at best of historical interest, at worst an exercise in nostalgia. Surely any determined developer would take the fan backlash on the chin and forge ahead with new ideas?

But why should they? There are other games stepping up to push forward the RPG form. Why shouldn't *DQ* cater for its vast, established market that holds it so dear precisely because it's willing to hold its form in stasis, to renovate itself as a staid classic rather than risking a reinvention that might prove just as unpalatable as the original brash colours of now-faded antiquities? Perhaps the National Trust could advise.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



DRAGON QUEST VIII: JOURNEY OF THE CURSED KING

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), FEBRUARY (UK) PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX
DEVELOPER: LEVEL 5 PREVIOUSLY IN: E128, E137







The novelty of European voice actors (an addition from the silent Japanese original) largely overrides any mistimed deliveries. The protagonist does not speak throughout





Dragon Quest VIII* is beautiful. It's best to start here, as this is where you will likely begin. From the moment the start-up sequence explodes its world over the screen in a blast of light, colour and promise, the camera trailing two magnificent hawks as they dip and soar over rolling hills through a heavenly Sega-blue palette, it will have you under its spell.

You'll fall in slack-jawed love when you step out of the first town, gaze into the colossal draw distance and realise that no longer is there that world-map divide which your suspension of disbelief could never quite bridge. Synapses will snap happy as they pick out a speck in the distance before perceiving it to be a castle shimmering a half hour's walk away. You'll climb a hill to get your bearings, the horizon full of wild imaginings and whispered promises, before tumbling down again to chase after your adventures. And that delight will grow when your ragtag band of companions first open their mouths and, rather than the expected hammy American, you hear vibrant, rich and diverse European voices. In perhaps the greatest videogame localisation the west has yet enjoyed, an unbroken, darting, live orchestral score generously replaces the original Japanese synthesisers; a flawless aural backdrop to this live-in-fairytale.

It's the kind of game that gives you butterflies as you flick the power switch on; the kind of game that wakes you early from sleep with a siren song calling you from your world into its; the kind of videogame that makes you happy and innocent again. But, as the hours trickle away, so too the hyperbole drains with them. Very quickly, it becomes obvious that the visual invention the game showboats at every turn is underpinned by mechanics you have played a thousand times; that the pixels cover a most straightforward piece of RPG engineering. It's evidenced everywhere from the battle system with its hammer-the-X-button simplicity, through to the linear levelling which allows virtually no customisation as you chip away at your character with exp points, slowly revealing their full, predestined potential.



What has happened is that Level 5 has turned the *Dragon Quest* dynamic on its head. This has always been a series of function over form, especially as the years have rolled on; but now that the form has been so drastically overhauled, it reveals a function nearly as old as videogame time itself. But to call this style over substance would be grossly inaccurate. The substance is all there – weighty, deep and stretching off 90 hours into the distance. But, unmistakably, it is substance from another time. This is an old RPG-by-numbers puzzle; delightfully, spectacularly presented but, underneath it all, mutton dressed as lamb. So the game's success seesaws on the player's love of the orthodox RPG mechanic and, naturally, whether this is simplicity in the sense of studied, understated elegance or just idiotic, dull-brained conservatism.

> Synapses will snap happy as they pick out a speck in the distance before perceiving it to be a castle shimmering a half hour's walk away

Unfortunately, it's the latter. *Dragon Quest* has none of the cutscene exuberance of a *Xenosaga*, none of the battle complexit of a recent *Final Fantasy*, not any of the limitless subquesting of an *Atelier Iris* nor th complete freedom of team customisation that Nippon Ichi's titles afford. There are just a few special items to collect littered across







Monsters are delightfully varied in design, full of wit and flair and, like the very best antagonists, less like tiresome adversaries than sub-characters in the sprawling story





There are no chapters to break up the storyline as such, but as you reach each fresh area and castle, a new narrative vignette usually uncurls which must be resolved before you move on to the next



Your character carries around in his pocket a tiny mouse named Munchie. By feeding Munchie different flavours of cheese during battles you can unleash a range of bonus attacks which can turn the tide in your favour – even if you don't happen to be fighting against elephants

the world and a simple option for combining two items to create a new one in an alchemy pot. The gameplay decoration is basic and the flow of play one-dimensional. Just four companions comprise your battle team throughout the game. The story is simple, childlike even; the characterisation primary coloured, the plot straightforward; a TV dinner of cultural consumption.

But, despite all this, *Dragon Quest VIII* still relentlessly spurs you on. Crucially, everything the game does, it does overwhelmingly well, sparkling with an assurance that comes from having achieved everything it set out to do. In truth, no one has really ever tried to modernise the knights-and-castles fantasy of the Super Nintendo's RPGs so missed by genre fans. This game feels like a rediscovery of all that made the best of those games great, choosing to revitalise and celebrate them rather than follow the crowd and try to force modern elaborations into an old framework. There's innocence in creator Yuji Horii's world, which Level 5 has used its development skills to masterfully highlight and enhance, and ironically, it feels fresher than any other Japanese RPG this generation.

Whether you will agree is another matter. Of all *Dragon Quest*'s blessings, its greatest is charm, and this is perhaps the most mixed blessing of all. If you are easily seduced then you will follow grinning and besotted wherever the game leads. But if you are long bored of RPGs' outdated vices and devices – the random battles, the clichéd storylines and the incremental level-ups – you might not be so readily persuaded once the honeymoon glow dissipates and the wonder of its beauty turns to weary familiarity.

But those who truly fall in love, who recognise what is under the surface for what it really is, will keep turning the wheels, rolling the dice, drinking the charm, faithfully weaving their adventuring life tapestry together until the very end. **[8]**

From page to pixel



Level 5 has created a wonderful world, lifting Akira Toriyama's lively designs (perhaps his best since *Chrono Trigger*) from the functional, often bland and lifeless sprite representations of *Dragon Quest*'s past 20 years into classic three-dimensional heroes. That the team is restricted to just four characters might seem overly restrictive at first, but in practice it works well, eliminating the need for long deliberation over who to level up and who to leave on the sidelines each fight.



PERFECT DARK ZERO

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: RARE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E155



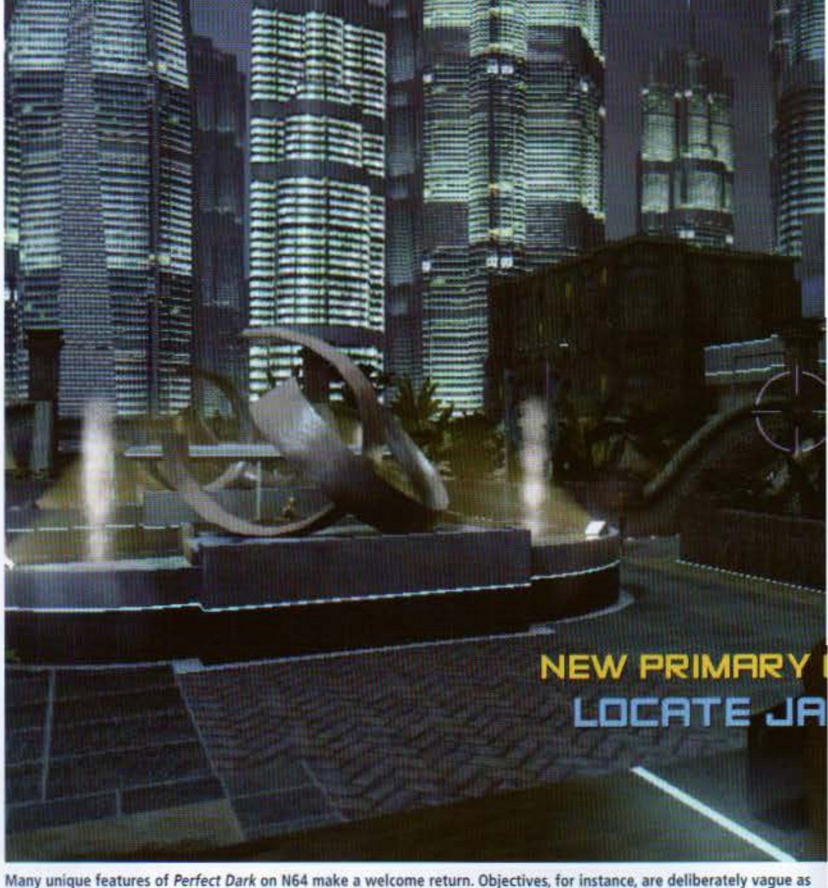
The frequent inability of *Zero* to batter tailor-made coop set-pieces into something appropriate for solo play is one of many apparent concessions to 360's communal ethos. Set-pieces involving vehicles – specifically this hovercraft escape – are prime examples



Able to locate enemies via sound, your radar is sensitive to volume, with louder weapons leaving a more stubborn mark on its display. The shotgun's secondary fire mode emits a sonar ping that expands upon this, determining the location of everyone within range

Perfect Dark, a game ambitious to a fault yet dazzling in its sophistication, has left for its sequel an opportunity to re-establish the era in which Rare once set the FPS standard. It, together with *GoldenEye*, tossed a high ball of advanced mission structure and multiplayer ingenuity that even *Halo* has since failed to intercept. And yet it's to Bungie's game – the near-complete package, stellar launch title and perennial Xbox brand icon – that *Perfect Dark Zero* will largely be compared. In failing to achieve anything like the same grade of professionalism and polish, and by resting on its ageing laurels all too often, Xbox 360's chief launch title falls short.

Much can be put down to over-zealousness. Seldom has a flagship been so over-laden with the ambitions of both creator and sponsor; Rare wants a sequel to one game, Microsoft another. *Perfect Dark Zero*'s cargo consequently includes 14 singleplayer missions – each offering up divergent paths for cooperative play – together with a sprawling matrix of multiplayer modes and modifiers, near omnipresent Xbox Live support, optional objectives, difficulty-dependent objectives, secondary fire modes for all weapons and tertiary fire modes for many, puzzle-powered gadgets, AI bot support, operable vehicles – you get the idea.



Many unique features of *Perfect Dark* on N64 make a welcome return. Objectives, for instance, are deliberately vague as they flash across your HUD. The full description, however, is also received by your d-Pal where it reveals important details

Of course, such ambition is to be applauded, but what comes of it here is a violent strobe of quality, alternating so quickly between good and bad as to baffle the senses. While the series' first steps into stealth, for example, were taxing and sometimes frustrating scrapes, five intervening years and an entire stealth genre has done nothing whatsoever to raise its game. It has, in fact, lowered it, since even the more conventional missions are set in levels more rats' nests than tactical tests, making you frustratingly dependent on the directional chevrons that are laid down in order to guide you from one waypoint to the next – more often than not right under the noses of your supposedly vigilant targets.

Yet between the many moments when the AI lapses into a malfunctioning stupor, the run-and-gun, hide-and-dive combat proves satisfying. Taking cover should work better than it does: the related button



> The weapons here are the real characters, while the various Datadyne and Carrington operatives attached to them are the appendages

prompt is hesitant to appear and, worse, capable of positioning you on the wrong side of a defensive corner. But something stubbornly compelling survives the many flaws. More so than in the first *Dark*, the weapons here are the real characters, while the various Datadyne and Carrington operatives attached to them are the appendages. Convincingly weighty, they encourage strategic play via secondary functions, igniting both the screen and the motors of the 360 pad with their fire.

Zero's stabs at drama, though, are comical, and its comic interludes cringeworthy. As suggested by the kaleidoscopic appearance of Dark herself in recent months, it has no defining character beyond crude anime and the adolescent cliché that a self-respecting *No One Lives*







Agent difficulty is practically a God mode thanks its unwavering leniency. But it provides a valuable insight into the demands of each mission for those who fancy a second, third or even fourth shot at more demanding settings. It also validates an inventory selection screen that feels, initially, like a complete waste of space

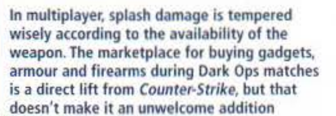








In multiplayer, splash damage is tempered wisely according to the availability of the weapon. The marketplace for buying gadgets, armour and firearms during Dark Ops matches is a direct lift from *Counter-Strike*, but that doesn't make it an unwelcome addition







The Phantom and Shield are two of the game's most memorable weapons, the former cloaking the player and introduced through an encounter that'll strike a chord with players of the first *Perfect Dark*'s G5 Building: Reconnaissance mission. The latter speaks largely for itself, but makes for a surprisingly strategic multiplayer weapon



The spring-loaded eruptions of shattered body armour that often greet a successful shot start looking less ridiculous once the game's heavy artillery is introduced. The clown-like physics and parades of identical enemies, however, do not

Forever title would know to avoid. Visually, it's a grim exercise in the overuse of cosmetics and the undervaluation of design, the occasional sunbeam glancing off a weapon in mid-reload as a picturesque horizon chances into view providing some respite from the unsubtle and distracting bump-mapping that clogs every pore. More trying is the soundtrack, a contrived barrage of espionage-themed electronica and rock that's relentless to the point of brutality. Incidental dialogue, meanwhile, is routinely moronic.

Penetrating these messy layers, however, reveals a multiplayer suite that goes to great lengths to reimburse. Cooperative play is a small step forward – partial proof that paired players needn't ride on the same rail – but it nonetheless shares the same flawed framework as the regular story. The detailed environments still conspire to overly camouflage the enemy, signposting is delegated to the chevron trail, frames repeatedly glitch, and the infrequent boss battles remain strategically barren tests of the most basic techniques. But given enough players, communicators and, if necessary, bots, the twin competition modes of Deathmatch and Dark Ops are as close to a saving grace as *Zero* is going to get.

Splitting all-out and tactical game types between them, the two modes are stuffed with features. Six maps – moderately ambitious in layout yet immense in scale – are available, while additional bases can be coupled prior to play to expand the arena, and each local district contained within is prominently identified upon entry to ease coordination. It's here, amid the laboured animations and exaggerated physics, that the full capability of the game's weapon and movement systems is brought to bear.

Running at pace with guns holstered, stealing weapons and changing clips mid-roll are all practices worth learning, the purposefully unbalanced vulnerabilities of bodies below and above the neck making headshots a painstaking but supremely rewarding technique. The system of picking up and discarding arms, however, often leads to the surrender of vital split-seconds as you dance back and forth, holstering what you wish to retain while acquiring precise position above a chosen weapon. But while such mechanical fumbles grate, the game's tactical elements are entirely constructive, especially those that *Counter-Strike* players will immediately recognise as their own.



Employ the secondary fire of the CMP-150 and memories of Total Recall will flood your brain. The holographic clone it projects from its barrel is perfect for poking around treacherous corners, while the ensuing gunfire from unknowing opponents proves no less gratifying

Given the game's marketing as one woman's war against the corporations, the irony of *Perfect Dark Zero* is that the quality of the gaming experience it offers degrades in parallel with the number of people playing it. Mass multiplayer matches show the game at its strategic, riotous best, but while smaller matches still reward and coop wrings the best from the mission design, there's no question that *Zero* is a far better competitive sport than it is a personal quest. **[7]**

Hardware conflict



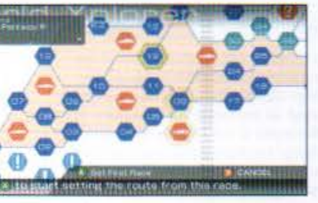
Considering just how many tricks the game's weapons have up their sleeves, the inclusion of further gadgets and associated puzzles seems unnecessary when employed as they are here. The return of the CamSpy is a nice touch, but little has been done to make its use challenging or its objectives interesting. The Locktopus – an electronic lockpick that triggers a *Splinter Cell*-type analogue-stick puzzle – holds no interest now that so many other titles have bled dry the idea. The Datathief involves a timing test that's so badly introduced and presented as to be confounding at first glance, while Demo Kits, with their built-in (though hardly practical) tile puzzles, succeed in offering a minor braintease at least, and an interesting multiplayer tool.



RIDGE RACER 6

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN/US), JANUARY 26 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO (JPN/US), EA (UK) DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE





By completing certain selections of races in World Xplorer mode you can 'capture' areas of its map, some of which contain prizes. Almost invariably, these are new cars to be added to the performance class they occupy on the map itself

Now that *Project Gotham Racing 3* has used 360 as a hi-def battering ram to push itself to the frontline of a congested and contested genre, it's time for Namco's launch favourite to find its own space on the console's fuzzily defined starting grid. If *PGR3* is current king of the road, then *Ridge Racer* is the joker, barely a driving game and more a mixture of snowboard carve-cornering and Scalextric track-hugging, with vehicles that feel as much spaceship as car. Despite its unreserved nature, and being about as tightly tethered to reality as the *Burnout* series, *Ridge Racer 6* hasn't floated away from its roots. It's content to sink into its well-established furrow of soaring slides and skids, and it still feels crisply satisfying with it. Albeit not immediately; definitely, unhappily not.

World Xplorer mode – *RR6*'s career, essentially – is a pretty tree diagram, a web of over 100 races that the player, starting from the bottom left, can work through in whichever direction they like. As the map moves to the right, the car class – the top speed of vehicles – increases, while moving up the Xplorer chart raises the difficulty. It's a welcome open-plan approach, but those first few hours of play are crushing, simply due to the gruelling, pedestrian speed of Class One and Two cars. It virtually forces you to play via bumper cam simply because its chase cam is just so unbearably slow during those vanilla classes, an ambling crawl that makes you wonder why the game should have even bothered with its unblemished framerate.

But. *But.* Progress to the latter classes and the speed finally catches up. Reach the end of World Xplorer – the shortest route involves just over 20 races – and the number of available events almost doubles. The web of race meets expands in several directions to include Advanced, EX and Duel category races. It's through these upper tiers that the game jerks into life, especially in the duels, one-on-one showdowns with some stupidly quick novelty vehicles, confrontations that hark back to the tightrope tension and precision of the classic *Ridge Racer* showdown with the black 'Devil' car. It's a challenge that's due more to CPU cheating than balance, but there's plenty of gratification to be had from applying increasing levels of confidence and skill, where an optimal boost start and Ultimate Charges (see 'Intro to nitro') become essential, especially in the face of opponents that use nakedly cheap behaviour in order to keep things dramatic. Standard races, despite the occasional variation (such as no-nitro conditions), are still a typical *RR* matter of barging your way through a queue from last place to first but, unlike *Ridge Racers*, there's plenty of room for jostling, undercutting and overtaking. And it's easy to be accurate; *Ridge Racer* games are about being flamboyant but sharp with it, and the game's looks definitely match the latter half of that philosophy, if not the former.

In motion, *RR6* is spotless. It never misses a beat, never struggles and never leaves the player without a fine sense of comprehension. It's the kind of resolute competence that makes it easy to forgive the game's less impressive visual components. There's no grime, no overreaching and no pretence of being anything more than it ever was before, and it *feels* high-definition even when not running on HDTV. However, most of the 15 available tracks (plus reverse equivalents, of course) have some surprisingly dull and retrograde stretches to their





The vehicles available across the four standard classes are typical – sporty models with exaggerated bodywork and an overkill of decals, some bulbous and some sleek. It's the special class that's the most interesting, though, featuring hovercraft, rocket ships and a handful of peculiar surprises





Despite its unreserved nature, and being about as tethered to reality as Burnout, RR6 hasn't floated away from its roots

The blabbermouth *Ridge* DJ is present, correct and just as likely to irritate as ever, thanks to a stream of encouraging gabble that accompanies the player's every action. Rave City also returns, offering some nighttime cityscapes and ludicrous jumps











Typically, *Ridge Racer 6* is as fond of Namco as Namco is of *Ridge Racer*. The game is freckled with in-house references, from *Katamari Damacy* billboards to a range of *Soul Calibur* vehicles, such as the Mitsurugi Meltfire or Kilik Starnose (with Astaroth tyres)

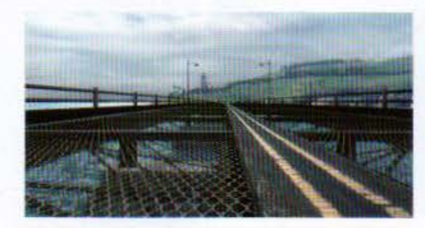




The list of attainable Achievements in *Ridge Racer 6* is a more thoughtful one than the rote checklist challenges of most first-wave 360 titles. Early goals include performing a 360 spin during a race, or playing an online race against someone in another country. Later, you're asked to unlock messages from *Ridge Racer* mascot Reiko Nagase with no explanation given

appearance, interspersed with patches of pleasing trackside detail: windmills, suspension bridges and overblown sunsets. At its uppermost speeds, the game's looks are a cool breeze, but pick any particular part of it out for slow-moving scrutiny and it's all just stuffily simple. Dynamic effects are few, but striking – the glowing slashes of taillight trails, the sparks from road-scraping bodywork, falls of glitter when approaching the starting grid while in pole position, fiery tyre tracks in the wake of a nitrous-filled skid. These aren't cutting-edge looks, but they have been cut with a polished scalpel, not so much exploiting 360 as simply exploiting the proven, longstanding benefits of clarity.

Ridge Racer 6 expands the cliché – it's maybe not one for fans of the series, but superfans of the series, those who eked every last charming unlockable out of the dizzying width of *Ridge Racers*' world tour mode, and wanted more. Those expecting an accessible experience that matches the game's accessible handling model will likely stall long before the game has completed its first proper lap. Those who stick it out, however, will get to feel its slide-heavy pleasure begin to flow, as skidding angles are perfected, and more and more bends are swallowed up in some increasingly excessive drifts. It's a path that's ploddingly plotted, requiring a warm-up period of several hours of investment before its engine truly starts to put out a powerful thrum, but has a summit that's worthwhile, if only for the faithful. **[8]**



All of the game's tracks are available from the outset for time-trial activity, with the game offering a dedicated Global Time Attack mode and ranking system for players to prove themselves. Straightforward online races and twoplayer splitscreen game options are also included

Intro to nitro



Like *Ridge Racers*, *RR6* offers three canisters of nitrous that are filled by performing slides at as high a speed as possible. There's an aspect to this that's simple to grasp, in that up to two or three canisters can be activated at once to achieve a more powerful and sustained boost, but there's more: Ultimate Charge. When an active boost is about to fizzle out, you're given a small window of opportunity to replenish a significant amount of nitrous by sliding during these final few seconds. It's difficult to use well, since it requires some significant foresight and track knowledge, but can be critical when duelling with some of the game's more challenging special vehicles, especially when they appear to have permanent repositories of the stuff to suck upon.



AMPED 3

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES DEVELOPER: INDIE BUILT, INC
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

Planning omission



One of the things that makes *Amped 3*'s vast acreage so hard to memorise is that all of it is editable. You can drop into edit mode anywhere on the slopes and add ramps, jumps, rails and general bric-a-brac (unlocked through completing bonus challenges throughout the game) to the run. It's an extraordinarily ambitious idea, and the game encourages you to use it to your advantage – adding extra railings to a tough grind challenge, for example. Sadly, the implementation shows just how ambitious it was – it's fiddly, buggy and annoying, and the game already offers such a huge range of locations that it's ultimately unneeded.

Microsoft has done a more thorough job than most of setting the agenda for its new machine: the console for the hi-def, always-on, customisation generation. And, to some extent, *Amped 3* is a lousy poster-boy for its aims. Visually, it's easy to be underwhelmed by its lack of detail. In motion, the game can be almost monochrome, flicking from the flat white and blue of skyscraping aerial moves to the white and black of rocky, rail-heavy canyons. Occasionally, there are some trees. These are green. But that's to do an injustice to the icy density that hi-def brings to these luxuriously clean settings – a sense of real, open-air space that makes *Amped* a nice place to be, something reflected throughout the game.

Because, while *Amped 3* may not have elaborate Live support (although scores for challenges are automatically checked against the online records) or endless character customisation (despite a decent-sized range of clothes and boards), it is in more important respects an absolute benchmark for how games are likely to be made this generation. This shows most strongly in the control. Gone is the dry precision which made *Amped 2* such an exacting, and eventually exhausting, challenge. Instead, tricking has become a flexible, forgiving whirl of idle improvisation and daredevil brinksmanship. Rails are sticky, landing requires only the slightest concentration, and vast combos can be stitched together by the seat of your (unlockable) hotpants.





The inclusion of the snowmobile make navigation easy – especially when motoring back uphill to trigger a challenge you missed coming down



The Magic Circle challenges, though pretty, are often tests of determination rather than skill alone, since you can't always see where the trail of rings leads. This can necessitate frequent retries as you learn the layout of the various courses

Part of the thinking behind this shift is clearly to increase the game's accessibility. Story mode can be cleared in less than eight hours, opening up seven mountains and dozens of runs, and breaking in players for the longer, tougher haul of tackling the stern extra challenges. But more than anything it's simply the huge area on offer that necessitates a rethink. *Amped 3* is truly vast, and memorising the detail and variety of its dozens of runs would be beyond even normally dedicated players. And so precision and planning give way to freewheeling, which is better served by handling more accommodating than demanding. It also helps gloss over the game's technical hiccups – awkward clipping can leave your rider momentarily stuck, requiring a quick reset of his position which would be unacceptably infuriating in a game where progress was harder won. There's no doubt the ultimate satisfaction and mastery the game offers is undermined, but it's an exhilarating and welcoming trade-off.

And if making more people have more fun is step one of the real next-gen masterplan, then *Amped 3*'s presentation is the next. The story mode is just that, an actual, improbably funny, deliriously odd story, rather than a dull zero-to-hero career progression, told with utter confidence that the people who like playing games and the people who like making them have plenty in common. All told, it's an enormously likeable package, and one which sets perhaps a much more valuable next-gen agenda: one of games which place a higher emphasis on player enjoyment than they do their own ambitions. **[7]**



Although completing the game's story mode unlocks all the mountains, you'll need to 'own' each of them to unlock all the runs. This is achieved by racking up enough points to fill your Awesomeness bar, and then finding onlookers to trick in front of – complete with the stylised puffs of Awe which issue forth from underneath your board. Impress them all, and the mountain is yours





Most missions require you to defend civilians by either collecting them for delivery to nearby helipads or guarding subway tunnels from zombies. When attacked, as you might expect, they join the legions of undead



INFECTED

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£23) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MARCH 2006 (UK)
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO DEVELOPER: PLANET MOON PREVIOUSLY IN: E147, E151

To fully appreciate what *Infected* can offer you'll have to quickly forget what you think you know about zombie battling, as your first awkward attempts at a straightforward run-and-gun technique will meet with quick failure in all of your mission objectives. Instead, you'll soon learn that the true nature of the game is in corralling enemies into weakened groups, where a single blast from your antiviral gun daisychains its way through each one in turn, with a satisfying visceral shower and a reward of ever more devastating weaponry.

Let it not be said that *Infected* doesn't have its moments of pure raw rushes of adrenaline, provoked as you enter a zone gone 'berserk', with every local zombie turned supercharged with infection, all suddenly hyper-aware of your presence and homing in at once. But it's just at the point when you've learned through the game's repetitious mission design how to effectively and satisfyingly deal with these situations, and when you've finally worked your way into the game's rhythms rather than trying to impose your own, that the few short hours you've invested bring the game to a sudden end. From there, all that's left is repeatedly returning to the too-brief levels in hopes of earning enough cash to unlock licensed character avatars, or going online.

Ad-hoc modes add more multiplayer variety than deathmatch, including this game of reverse tag where each player tries to remain the mad cow longest, but none have been made available online



Much touted throughout the game's development was its multiplayer infection system, where losing a battle to an opponent infects your game with their 'virus', represented by their custom-built avatar. Clearing the virus requires a replay of three newly infected singleplayer levels, or passing it on by besting three more opponents to clear it from your system. It's undoubtedly one of the most novel uses of the system's network capabilities, especially in the thrill of seeing a real-world map showing how far your own virus has spread. But given that singleplayer levels rarely last longer than three minutes, allowing an infection to spread requires supreme laziness on the part of the victim, greatly limiting the impact of the feature past firstparty hosts.

Unfortunately, the online battles – where you stand the greatest chance of spreading your virus beyond your own immediate area – are themselves severely underwhelming in comparison to the more varied selection of ad-hoc game types. Limited to one-on-one deathmatches, the available arenas are designed without sufficient cover or room for strategic planning. In conjunction with the game's lock-on targeting, it means they too easily devolve into two minutes of circle-strafing, alternating kills and waiting for the opposing player to slip up or get distracted by extraneous zombies to grab the lead.

For all its potential, *Infected* delivers precious little in either world: a singleplayer that blooms too late, and an underdeveloped online experience that withers too soon. **[5]**

Infected's quick-burst action is fierce and frenetic at its best but, hampered by imprecise lock-on targeting and too-slow turning (despite the 90-degree flip), is too wild and loose to achieve arcade-like shooting satisfaction







By weakening clusters of enemies with conventional weapons, long combo chains will form, with the antiviral splatter of a zapped zombie spilling on to the next throughout the group. Extra points are awarded for 'aerial combos' such as these

Knot bad



Though it arguably fits the game's mood rather well, it's inevitable that the cross-promotion of prominent nu-metal artists Slipknot (as both soundtrack and unlockable characters), as well as others of their ilk, will not be to every gamer's taste. Should the constant barrage of rapidfire double-kick drums and screaming growls prove too distracting, *Infected* also features a handful of exclusive tracks from the more palatable Junkie XL, and its playlist can graciously be hand-picked by the player.



THE MOVIES

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E151, E152

Everyone knows (or thinks they know) what happens beneath the water towers of Hollywood, but while *The Movies* proves its own knowledge on many occasions, it also seems confused as to whose shoes a gamer wants to fill. While you may expect it to seat you immediately in the director's chair, the best part of a day (the length of time it takes to fully unlock its more enjoyable Sandbox mode) will instead be spent toiling from that familiar vantage point between earth and sky – not quite stratospheric enough to suit a god, but lowly enough to suit its caretaker. The feared micromanagement dogsbody role is quickly dumped on you by the game's tutorial, and before long trees, toilets and all manner of corporate objets d'art clutter both your inventory and mind, leading you to wonder – initially, at least – where the advertised charm of Hollywood is hidden.

The attempt to infuse industry with glamour, greed and showbiz gossip is well conceived but poorly engineered. Studio staff must be handpicked via on-site recruitment facilities, and while extras, cleaners and construction workers are largely self-managing roles, your actors and directors can be prohibitively demanding. From the silent era to beyond the modern day, you'll pander to their every whim, plucking them from the ground when they're upset and assigning them a therapeutic distraction. Neglect them for too long or leave their interrelated stats to unbalance themselves and you'll have a tantrum on your hands, grinding production to a halt and – should your housekeeping skills also falter – your studio prestige and income into the ground. It's a threatening tone to take for a game wishing to encourage creative freedom, especially when applied to an exhausting model of the studio process that leaves you permanently short-staffed.

But *The Movies* is – in this case reassuringly – typical Lionhead: when it isn't menial, it's magical. The game's engine is exquisite, with tycoon, director, writer and viewer modes employing the same intricately modelled, energetically animated and user-defined actors and environments. Likewise, the Advanced Movie Maker systems, through which you assemble and direct scenes before managing sound and subtitles (the game's onscreen language is suggestively inflected gibberish), are largely efficient and creatively consuming. Just as it should be, the challenge here is presented almost solely to your imagination.

That this is one decidedly average experience and one decidedly great one jammed together becomes clear long before you're freed to fully enjoy yourself. Sandbox mode is available from the start, but it's crippled without the vital sets and facilities unlocked during the standard game. Perhaps, though, we've invited the arguably redundant tycoon mode upon ourselves – a result of our own persistent hankering for structure and purpose in the sandbox games we're given. Lionhead's wisdom here has been to separate the included rigid and freeform experiences into different modes, making marketable a game that could very easily have been branded a glorified machinima author instead. Its error – for it *is* guilty of something – lies in stopping short of severing them completely. **[7]**

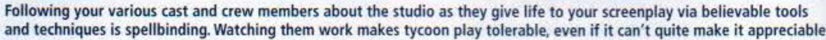
The hand that rocks



From the game's outset – before it has a chance to crack your spirit – *The Movies'* interface quickly establishes itself as a stellar example of Molyneux-branded design. Staff and stars can be tracked with a single click and grabbed with a button hold and drag. A sparkling trail assumes where you'll wish to place them, and buildings become floorplans as the cursor glides over for ease of access. Thought bubbles burst from staff members, at first detailing what it's assumed you'll want to know before expanding to reveal every stat. The script-creation interface is similarly intelligent and intuitive.



A customary roll of the mousewheel supplies you more with an immersion than a zoom, levelling the camera out at ground level



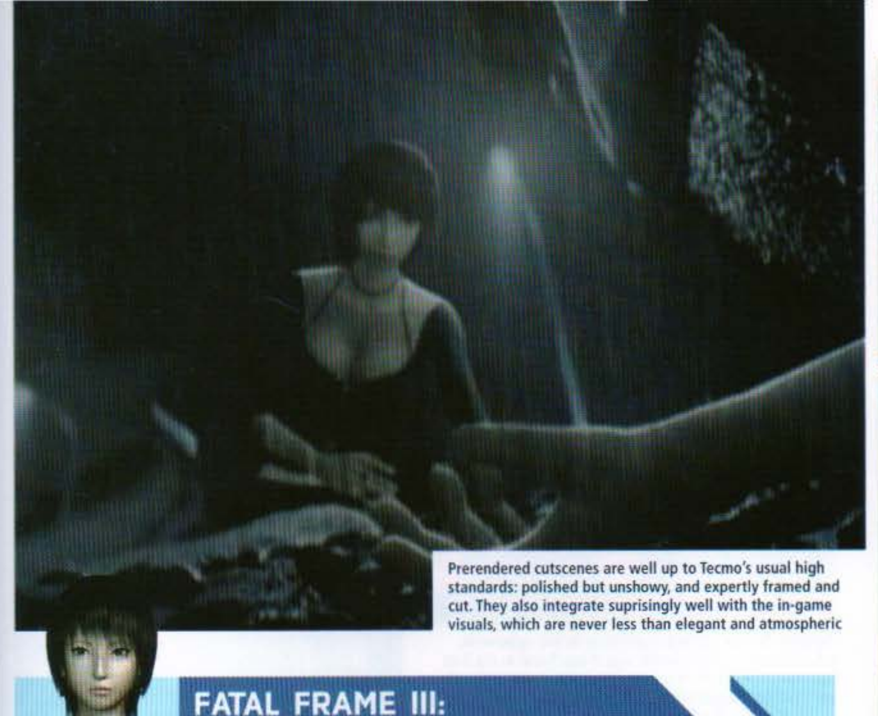
Following your various cast and crew members about the studio as they give life to your screenplay via believable tools and techniques is spellbinding. Watching them work makes tycoon play tolerable, even if it can't quite make it appreciable

Screenplays, you discover, can only be as good as the writing facility – the skill of their scribe has little impact. Should you write them yourself, you'll find quality reflects more the number of scenes than the overall structure



Uplifting occupations for cast and crew include rehearsing genres to boost their proficiency, revelling in conversation with their coworkers or relieving stress. Lavish trailers, competitive salaries, PAs and makeovers sustain their mood




Prerendered cutscenes are well up to Tecmo's usual high standards: polished but unshowy, and expertly framed and cut. They also integrate suprisingly well with the in-game visuals, which are never less than elegant and atmospheric




The stark visual contrast between the waking sections and the rest of the game is brilliantly exploited. They have an eerie, hushed detachment that begins to feel more dreamlike than the dreamworld

FATAL FRAME III: THE TORMENTED

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£29) RELEASE: NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: TECMO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E150

It's strange how quickly what seemed to be the future of survival horror can come to look like its past. The third instalment of Tecmo's compelling photo-exorcism series initially feels cumbersome and old-fashioned, weighed down with franchise tradition and mechanical alienation the way Japanese sequels so often are. It possesses an elegant restraint and a self-referential subtlety that are typical of its homeland too, but all but the most devoted fans are liable to feel that it's time for these ghost stories to be either retired or revolutionised. That wish could well be granted, because *The Tormented*'s tale unfolds as very much the final part of a trilogy.

This time there is a more mature central character: Rei Kurosawa, a professional photographer, still grieving after the death of her fiancé, Yuu. On an assignment to photograph a derelict house, she enters a reverie in which she sees and pursues Yuu's ghost through another abandoned building. Thereafter, she suffers nightly nightmares that revisit this 'manor of sleep'. It's in this dreamworld that she finds the occult camera obscura and the familiar, glacial, ethereal *Fatal Frame* gameplay takes place, with Rei exploring, solving puzzles, snapping fleeting phantoms for upgrade points and engaging more vengeful ghosts in firstperson photo-battles to steal – or release, it's never quite clear – their souls. It's little changed from the second game, being both more forgiving and more relentless than the first, and a little too generous with its shocks. But it still casts a unique spell.

The Tormented departs somewhat from tradition when Rei wakes up. Then it resembles a traditional adventure game, Rei pacing around her bright, clean, orderly modern home and searching among Yuu's things for clues. He was an anthropologist with an interest in urban legends that ties the threads of all three games together, as does the presence of Miku from the first game, now Rei's housemate and assistant. Occasionally clumsy, these sequences nonetheless allow for tremendous story depth and striking tonal variation. They do, however, frequently relieve the tension from a game that was already struggling to generate the horrific intensity of its predecessors (at least until the boundaries between worlds begin to blur).

Miku, a colleague and Kei Amakura (a friend of Yuu's and the uncle of *Crimson Butterfly*'s Mio) become integral to the story, supplying information in the waking world and, bizarrely, becoming the protagonists of some of Rei's dreams (see 'Hide and peek'). As token male and fanboy favourite, they supply a cheap shot of contrast and nostalgia in an attempt to cover *The Tormented*'s most disappointing weakness, character. Rei is a sullen, empty and more conventionally prurient presence. She saps the series of its tender, impossibly fragile heart.

Nevertheless, on its third outing, *Fatal Frame* is still a distinctive and engrossing game, with great narrative sophistication. *The Tormented* may read more as a mystery than a truly frightening horror story but, if it's to be a conclusion to this dark and lonely diversion from the beaten track, it will be a fitting and deserving one. **[7]**

Having the girls dress in skimpy nightwear before every night's dream is a rather blunt sexualisation of suspense, the foreplay before the fetishised horror. Previous instalments did Freud with more finesse, and more darkness too

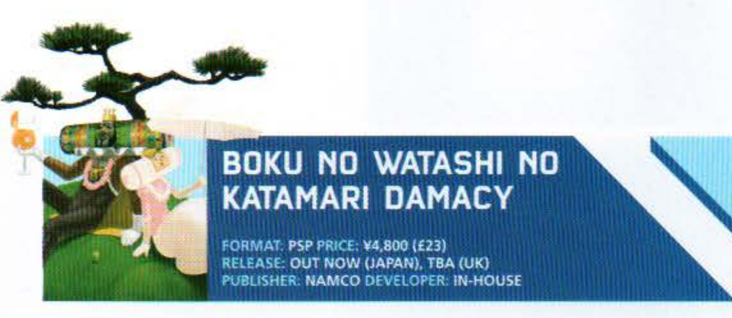



Like the first game, *The Tormented* takes full advantage of the old playwright's maxim of unifying place, time and action. Tecmo has plotted and suggested your looping, criss-crossing exploration of this sprawling haunted house with a subtlety and skill that disguise its manipulations of your progress

Hide and peek



Miku is frail, but a more powerful exorcist than Rei, while Kei is strong but a poor cameraman. The 'alternative' characters can access different areas of the house, the tiny Miku by crawling into small spaces, and Kei by moving large pieces of furniture. Each character also has unique abilities: Rei's flash pushes ghosts away while Miku's sacred stone slows them down, but Kei's is more idiosyncratic. He can crouch against cover to hide himself from ghosts, who will sometimes (but not always) leave him be after a while. It's not a very logical or thoroughly implemented novelty, and makes his sections more enervating than the girls'.



BOKU NO WATASHI NO KATAMARI DAMACY

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥4,800 (£23)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

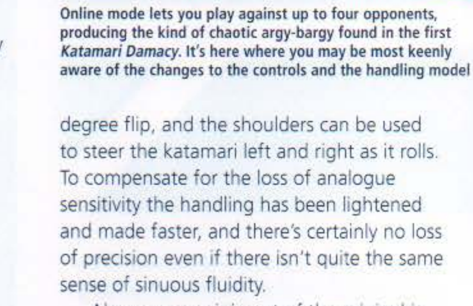
Permanent revolution



You might think that the charitable intentions of the game's story, combined with the pang of the real-world tragedy that 2004's tsunami wrought, would replace the original game's bittersweet atmosphere with a happier tone. In fact, the context makes it harder than ever to ignore that what the Prince's arrival in town most closely resembles is a natural disaster. Unless, of course, you want to read the whole game as an essay on the redistribution of wealth, as the cakes, cars, and sports arenas of the town-dwellers are converted into homes for distant refugees.

Me And My Katamari, the title translates as – a reference to just how connected people feel to the videogame generation's little Prince. Already a miniature hero, he's been squeezed even tinier in order to fit his gentle games of world-scouring and star-building into your pocket. Except that, for this adventure, instead of shooting skyward to form new constellations, the Prince's clumps of bric-a-brac are allowed to fall to Earth, forming new island homes for scores of animals left homeless after a tsunami.

Despite this change, almost every other element of the previous two games is in place. Indeed, it feels closer to the first game, limiting its environments to the townscapes and interiors rather than flower gardens or gingerbread houses, and liberally raiding the original's soundtrack. Even the process of learning the digital controls may remind you of your first, slightly clumsy attempts at the game. The twin-stick input has been directly translated on to the D-pad and face buttons, and the hour or two it takes your brain to rewire is time painfully but valuably spent. Double-taps enable the boost and 180-degree flip, and the shoulders can be used to steer the katamari left and right as it rolls. To compensate for the loss of analogue sensitivity the handling has been lightened and made faster, and there's certainly no loss of precision even if there isn't quite the same sense of sinuous fluidity.



Online mode lets you play against up to four opponents, producing the kind of chaotic argy-bargy found in the first *Katamari Damacy*. It's here where you may be most keenly aware of the changes to the controls and the handling model

Also more reminiscent of the original is the mission structure that mainly limits itself to straightforward size/time challenges, and has you revisiting the same locations time and again. It makes the game repetitive to play in long bouts, but it's clear from the five-minute limit of most missions that it's a game which has taken the PSP's pick-up-and-play maxim to heart. Strange, then, that it chains some of these missions into unnecessary 15-minute epics.

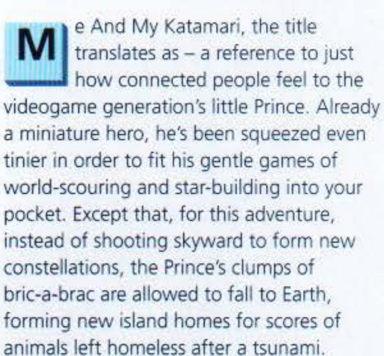
This isn't to suggest, however, that the game doesn't have some ideas of its own. On some levels day cycles into night as your katamari grows, and in others free access is given to some building interiors, letting you pluck unfortunate swimmers out of pools and secretaries out of chairs before rolling back outside to decimate the car park. And, while the PS2 games pulled their rainbow colours from a pastel paintbox, *Boku No Watashi No Katamari* takes advantage of the bright depth of the PSP screen to beef up the game's visuals with more primary vibrancy. The engine has also survived the miniaturisation process successfully: there is minimal pop-up on some of the busier levels, and the moments when your katamari expands are rather more intrusive, but on the whole it's smooth and competent.

In short, it's a game with its spirit, its satisfaction and its structure intact. It's no longer just the King Of All Cosmos who can hold the Prince in the palm of his hand. **[7]**





The King Of All Cosmos benefits most from the denser colours of the PSP version. Fail in your missions, however, and he takes out his displeasure on you in brutal style



Although the game has been deliberately tooled for portable play, one of the best suited elements of the new game is drawn direct from the PS2 versions. Browsing through the items you've found and the bits and bobs (and people and pets) you've rolled up is an engrossing way to kill five minutes



Most of the items are familiar from earlier games, but the satisfaction of snagging an entire tower of mah-jong tiles, say, is as strong as ever. The Prince's unlockable cousins, however, are yet more bizarre





ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $35 (£21) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MARCH 24 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

Animal Crossing seems like a game destined to remain ever out of step with itself. Debuted on N64, improved for western GC owners, returned to Japan and now unveiled on DS, it's a game which has had four releases but no clear sequel – each a refinement rather than a proper reworking. And, as a consequence, it's impossible to shake the feeling of disappointment when you arrive in your new, handheld village. At a functional level, this is exactly the same game into which you've already sunk hours – possibly years. It's a rerun of that idyllic life: mortgage-paying, fossil-hunting, fruit-farming, furniture-collecting, KK Slider-applauding and all.

There are a number of novelties – not least new hats and accessories, constellations you can draw and name, and villagers who can talk to each other as well as visit your house – and these are very welcome. But, for every addition, there's a price to be paid for squeezing the game on to the DS. Seasonal festivals, most notably, have been replaced by occasional village events, such as fishing competitions. Co-villagers share an attic in a single house rather than having a place (and a mortgage) of their own. Indeed, the whole game – slightly preposterously for something which was already famed for being almost impossible to play for more than 15 minutes a day – has been scaled down to be more conducive to pick-up-and-play. The village has shrunk considerably, key buildings (such as the post office and the town hall) have been merged into one, and the layout of each town seems designed to minimise running about. It's a surprisingly astute decision which means that while you still may be playing for only 15 minutes a day, fewer of those minutes are wasted.





The biggest visual disappointment in the blankness of the sky. Enlivened at night by your hand-drawn constellations, in daylight there's little to relieve the plainness



The game can be entirely controlled by the stylus, from fishing to pattern-making to writing, but some of the more fiddly bits of interaction, like weeding while holding a shovel, are best accomplished with a combination of touchscreen and conventional control

But, of course, this was never meant to represent the great leap forward for *Wild World*. *Animal Crossing* was conceived as a communication game, and with Nintendo's fledgling WFC service, that communication goes global. No longer can you only visit friends in their slightly eerie absence, skulking solo around their village. Now, three or four can gather together in one town, and although actual communication can be minimal (the qwerty touchscreen keyboard is perfectly implemented, but still inevitably laborious), there's a tremendous sense of companionship as you fish side by side, compare outfits or collaborate on a new orchard. It's easy to rue Nintendo's decision not to open up that communication to voice chat or offline letter writing, but the need to guarantee the safety of younger players has the side effect of also safeguarding the fairytale atmosphere of meeting up in the game.



Animal Crossing's greatest pleasure has always been literary, and *Wild World* is just as strong. Blathers is keen to discuss the culinary implications of every fish you catch and the villager's banter remains deranged, unpredictable and occasionally disarmingly heartfelt

Because the atmosphere is the heart of *Animal Crossing*. There's little room for improvement, because it got next to nothing wrong first time around. And, despite the familiarity, the longer you spend in your scaled-down village, the more you're soothed into a gentle, constructive daydream which is every bit as charming as in all its other incarnations. **[8]**

Making friends



Animal Crossing was always at its best when letting you create, and *Wild World* continues that tradition. There's a small pang of disappointment that the pattern-design tool hasn't evolved to maximise the potential of the stylus, but it's soon dissipated by the discovery that you can apply your patterns separately to hats and shirts and even to floor tiles all around the village. The night sky, too, can be engagingly personalised and, with online connectivity, both your patterns and your constellations can be spread around the world via friends, like the nicest ever virus.



VIEWTIFUL JOE DOUBLE TROUBLE

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $40 (£35)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MARCH 2006 (UK)
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: CLOVER STUDIO

If one thing has become readily apparent a year into the DS's life, it's that many developers continue to be uneasy with its defining features. The least among them treat either additional screen as window dressing, filling it with sparse design and at best a thumb-sized secondary function button, eager to give at least the appearance of proper innovation.

Creditably, it's apparent that Clover has truly taken the opportunities that the hardware provides to heart, and has integrated them into the design document, rather than exploiting them as cheap afterthought. More overtly puzzle-based than its predecessors, this time around Joe has been endowed with new tactile VFX powers: scratching an enemy rains rocks and pot lids down on them from the sky, slide replaces zoom, as you swap the close-up above for the one below, and split shifts the top half of your current view a full width either left or right. And in the game's thoughtful and deliberately designed moments, all of these touchscreen innovations work brilliantly, with the latter the most rewarding when it suddenly clicks that a seemingly just-out-of-reach exit can simply be pulled closer for easy access.

All DS game developers have had to grapple with the fact that there



Though they might not be wrapped in console-quality special effects, *Double Trouble*'s low-poly signature Hollywood sets are inarguably high-quality, comprising some of the richest and most detailed visual design available on the handheld



Scratch and ye shall receive – *Double Trouble*'s new scratch VFX power allows Joe to strike a pose and let your fingers do the fighting, as you send down all manner of weighty objects on to the heads of the hapless victims below

simply is no smooth transition from traditional D-pad and buttons to touchscreen control, especially with awkward stylus fumblings, and *Double Trouble* plays a dangerous game in integrating the two as tightly as it does. In standard combat it can largely be written off as a non-issue for those not attempting especially viewtiful kills, but heated boss battles in particular continually run the risk of devolving into whimpering, desperate thumb-smudging paroxysms. In most cases, cheaper strategies and slow-motion feints are still easily at hand, but with text cues for tactile attacks weaving and bobbing around your foe, it can feel like taunting punishment for less dexterous hands.

Trying as they might be, though, these maddening moments are far enough between to be only a minor blemish on an otherwise fantastic portable action game. *Double Trouble* retains all of the style and pose of the originals, its cardboard cutout environments are an especially perfect fit for the DS's lesser 3D capabilities, and it manages to maintain a steady rhythm between action and puzzle, with neither threatening to overshadow the other. Like *Battle Carnival*, *Double Trouble* is definitely no substitute for the real thing, but it is a very viewtiful facsimile. **[7]**



IKUSAGAMI

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£32) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: GENKI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E155

In one way, *Ikusagami* stands shoulder to shoulder with the recent PS2 conversion of *Resident Evil 4*. While the next generation is finishing its muscle-flexing warm-up of showy tech demos, *Ikusagami* stands as an example of the potential still remaining to be wrung out of the hardware: as fantasy battlefields go, these are the busiest yet. They heave with shoals of troops and monsters, simple but effective character models that form an origami army of allies and enemies whose only visual stutter is the flicker that ripples through them as their models update en masse. The sensation of being part of a grand ruckus is conveyed more vividly and effectively than in any other brawl-focused beat 'em up, as shimmering fields of demons course around in the background, or surge over the crest of a hill. There's usually little variation up close, but the visual impact of such an overwhelming swarm of bodies isn't lost, although it's a game that benefits from the ghostly smear of bloom lighting more than most.

However dazzling that throng may be, it's far less thrilling to be in the midst of it; repetition sets in more quickly than in any other combo-driven riot game. Friendly troops can be issued a simple stay/follow command, and their preservation is essential in some areas (as only they can be commanded to build the magical poles which harvest power and act as basic defences), but this rarely feels like anything more than the barest of strategy. It's not about



Unfortunately, one of the weaker character designs is a vital one – the game's lead is bland, lacking in charisma and runs awkwardly, a league away from the vibrant main cast of *Otogi 2*. The pillars of flame that spring up during all-out assault (above) are ugly, but an effective flourish in the player's peripheral vision

turning the tide of a battle, more stomping it utterly into submission in swift and brutal fashion, travelling between the clouds of red dots that spawn on the map, and often having to wait for your sluggish troops to catch up. The HUD itself may seem cluttered, but that large map is essential when using your most powerful attack, which allows you to scorch through the enemy ranks in a blur that's hard to direct without the onscreen overview.

Still, carving through such striking clusters of enemies, slamming into the ground from up on high and sending them scattering like grains of rice on a giant drum skin, is cathartic and suitably pyrotechnic – but loses its spark long before that remarkable maximum KO count of 65,535 is reached. It's arresting, sure, but unlike *RE4*, the awe is far from persistent. **[5]**

Several time-trial modes are available, to be tackled with unlocked weapons. They're the essence of the most hectic portions of the mission-based main campaign, with one throwing the maximum numbers of enemies at the player in a huge valley, with the goal of slaying as many as possible in a slim time limit







TRUE CRIME: NEW YORK CITY

FORMAT: GC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £35
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: LUXOFLUX PREVIOUSLY IN: E155

Many ambitious things bear flaws, their desire to push back boundaries so often tethered to horrible realities like deadlines. And so it is with *True Crime: New York City*, a game that flips and flops between offering up sights and sounds that have you smiling one moment but rolling your eyes the next, bringing to mind an image of a development team simply running out of time in its fight against a mile-long list of bugs and other issues.

In one way, *TC:NYC* is a greater achievement than the game it most obviously, intentionally, resembles: *GTA: San Andreas*. Its city streets are heaving with the kind of detail absent from Rockstar's game, but the cost of such extravagance, sadly, is sometimes a framerate that makes you think your PS2 is about to expire.

At least the soundtrack throws up a handful of classic tunes of yesteryear, which serves to embellish the gritty atmosphere. But then your ears are assaulted by an NPC with possibly the least authentic Irish accent ever recorded. Then you press L2 to access a doorway and instead of negotiating it as you might expect, hero Marcus Reed slips directly through the adjacent concrete wall. And then, having successfully hunted down two of your targets during another mission, the radar blip tracking the third and final suspect suddenly disappears, leaving you no option but to irritatedly start it all again from scratch. The game just brims with broken bits.

But there's an equally large problem here, and it's the same one that afflicted *True Crime's* Los Angeles excursion: New York simply isn't as much fun as any of the places Rockstar has dreamed up for its *GTA* series. By keeping it real, the game retains many of the things that make navigating the real city more of a pain than a pleasure: countless faceless skyscrapers don't make for memorable landmarks, and facing the wrong way down a jammed one-way street when you're in a hurry to get somewhere is the sort of challenge few will relish. Taxi rides to your destinations often prove the most satisfying options. Can that be right?



The game is simply overloaded with detail. Blatting through bins and boxes is fun, but the host hardware creaks under the strain of providing such furniture while also lining the streets with cars, pedestrians and architecture

Gunplay and hand-to-hand combat have been refined, yet vehicle behaviour has gone in reverse – cartoonish situations see even small nudges bring about whirlwind spins.

The mission content, stuffed as it is with dimwitted enemies who simply stand there waiting to be blown away, is rarely taxing, and there's only a fraction of *San Andreas'* story-based action to be had here, meaning that you can finish the game in a day (assuming you ignore the wholly forgettable sub-missions, something that is easily done).

Desperate for more *GTA*? This is a part-finished, only infrequently entertaining alternative that you'll play through with gritted teeth. **[4]**

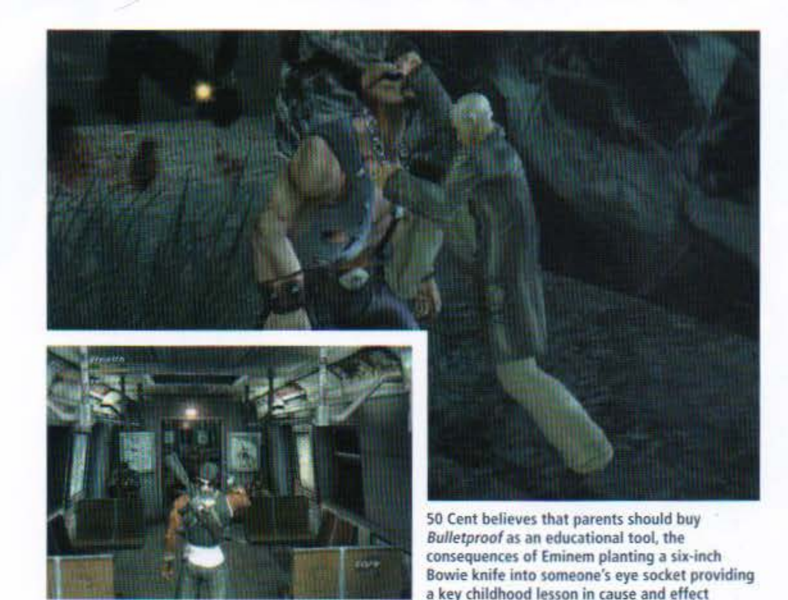
The story is supplemented by countless distractions, but few offer any genuine reward. Gunplay (left) works, and now offers an option for more precise aiming. Grappling (below) can be entertaining, giving the option to plant evidence on suspects if you're going 'bad cop'





50 CENT: BULLETPROOF

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £35
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VIVENDI UNIVERSAL
DEVELOPER: GENUINE GAMES


50 Cent believes that parents should buy *Bulletproof* as an educational tool, the consequences of Eminem planting a six-inch Bowie knife into someone's eye socket providing a key childhood lesson in cause and effect

Bulletproof, says the marketing spiel, is *his* game: the mind and music of hip-hop golden child and convicted drug dealer 50 Cent siphoned into an interactive experience. Despite this being clearly untrue – the game being the work of *Fight Club* developer Genuine and sponsored predominantly by white businessmen – it still feels believable. This, after all, is the calibre of game you might well produce having been shot three times and then stabbed.

A journey through an ego fantasy that's taken many years to cultivate, everything within it is geared toward either aggrandising Mr Cent himself or promoting the wares of his musical militia, G-Unit. Its levels are unambitious setups for relentless, cumbersome gunplay (there is no lock-on and analogue calibration is sluggish) and morbidly artful acts of close-quarters butchery. The story, communicated via relentless cutscenes, champions the vulgarity of its twisted characters above any attempt at drama or, as would be beneficial, irony. Even when associates Dr Dre and Eminem appear, their contributions consist of little more than their faces and a tirade of expletives.

But the members of G-Unit, it emerges, have unadvertised powers that will at least put a smile on your face. A mere touch from their sportswear-clad limbs can send exploding barrels and so-called 'mobile cover' (refuse skips, for example) flying in all manner of directions, mere furniture adopting Exorcist-like levels of kinetic rage as the pantomime hoodlums blunder along, guns blazing at factory-line opponents. So poor is the use of Havok physics (and, indeed, more routine code) that doors regularly bowl over those using them while enemies clip through the featureless walls and, hilariously, the floor.

While *Bulletproof* isn't quite as simple as its cast – it does at least implement an arcade mode and strategic tactics such as taking cover behind corners and human shields – it nonetheless remains broken. It's a generous multimedia package, admittedly, but you'd arguably be better off spending extra on Cent's entire back catalogue than accessing it here. Consider it sanity tax. **[2]**


Cent's gun fetish extends to having an entire wall of his crib dedicated to his unlockable arsenal




PC CD-ROM
BLACK & WHITE

TIME EXTEND



BLACK & WHITE

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE DATE: **2001**

What happens when the god of god game developers makes the god of all god games?

Darkness, light, heaven, earth and sea. Sun, moon, grass, fish and fowl. And then, just six days in, comes man. Player one takes the stage and the creation process is complete. *Black & White* is a game that from the off does little to discourage Christian parallels, whether it's the swirling darkness and light of the opening sequence or the conventional cloud-perching, snow-bearded deity who represents your good conscience. It may be a convenient shorthand, but *Black & White* took the god-game label more seriously than ever before. But there is a crucial difference in the theology. In Peter Molyneux's universe, god doesn't create man; men create the gods they need. The player's character, a fledgling god, is called into being by the prayers of anguished parents, watching in panic from the beach as their young child is circled by sharks. So where does that leave you, as the hero of the quintessential god game? Suddenly you're not so much the great I Am, as the great How Can I Help?, a hired hand paid off in wads of worship – 34 belief for conjuring some wood, 16 for helping bring the crops in.

There is, of course, the option to rebel. To kick over the traces and go bad, wreaking havoc on the people whose desperation for mercy created you. Even then, though, you can't escape the caretaker role. Even if your regard for your flock extends only to wanting to ensure there's a steady stream of child victims for your sacrificial altar, you still need to invest time breeding and feeding to keep their numbers up. It's soon apparent that, even if this is a god game, no one else around treats you as omnipotent. Within seconds of starting your first proper quest, the Creature Trainer is talking to you with all the big-vowelled condescension of a nanny trying to sweet-talk a toddler. And, once you've done your chores and been rewarded with your creature, you accelerate straight from childhood to parenthood – burping your bug-eyed tiger when he eats the wrong thing and tutting over his toilet training. Wasn't there supposed to be a bit in between? A bit when you felt, if not like a god, then at least like a grown-up?



The animation of your creatures does as good a job of communicating their character as it does of communicating their stats

It's this contradiction which is at the heart of all god games. Although promising ultimate power, the design challenge is always focused on how to limit that power: it wouldn't have made *Black & White* a better game if you'd been able to toss off a mouse gesture that casts 'I Win'. And so your potency is metered, dependent on the prayers of your followers. Your influence is circumscribed, penned in by a smoky ring of red. In an odd ecological twist, you're even dependent on natural resources:



MOD SQUAD

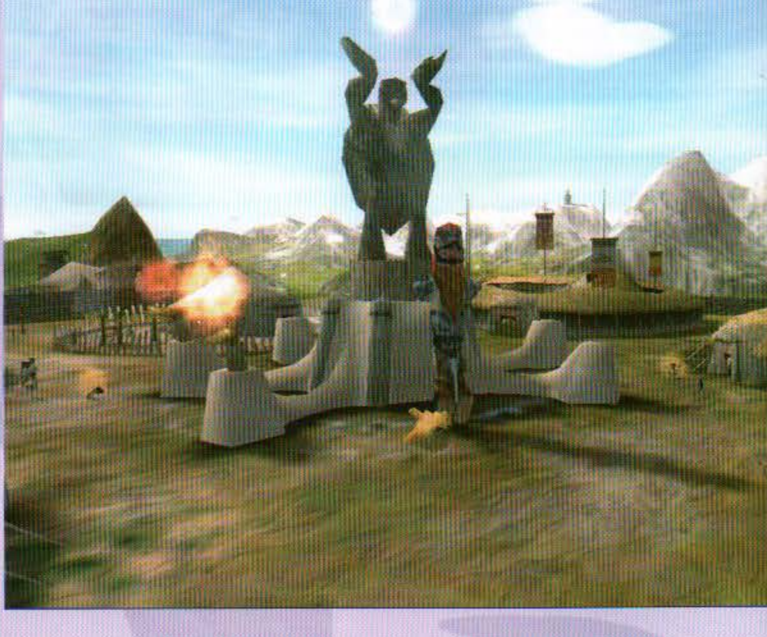
Although the release of *Black & White* was blighted by a bug which made it all but impossible to keep your worshippers well-fed, once the game was out in the wild it was sustained with some fantastic add-ons both from within Lionhead (most notably with a WinAmp plug-in which let your creature pass judgement on your taste in music) and from the user community. Specially designed maps provided intricate playgrounds for your creature, and potentially game-breaking cheats sometimes liberated the more interesting aspects of the gameplay from the mission structure of the main game.



strip the land of trees and the seas of fish and your godhood can soon be brought up short. And, while you may be able to frazzle the odd helpless fisherman or scoop up lost and lonely sheep, you look like a second-class citizen next to your creature's freedoms. He's got no one to please but himself – no villager raising pesky flags or whiney pleas, and at worst a bit of a slap for eating something he shouldn't. He's got unlimited magic, whether he's raining grain into the storehouse or ushering clouds of bats through a terrified village. And, at night, he can snore in front of the village fire while adoring children dance and cheer around him. You're a floating flashlight with money worries.

All of which sounds an unappetising prospect, and does little to explain the enraptured enthusiasm of those who love the game. And that's because the creature works to balance the inevitable constrictions on your capabilities, by emphasising your place at the top of the evolutionary ladder. By making the creature so much grander and powerful than Eden's inhabitants, and then making him dependent and subordinate to you, the game gives you back much of the sense of omnipotence that its structure has to rob from you. The stronger he is, the stronger you must be, and so training him becomes your greatest focus and most rewarding task within the game.

Black & White's creatures were entirely beguiling. They may not quite have lived up to the game's early hype, but they still eclipsed everything that had gone before and, for many years, everything that went after. Expressive, contrary and quick-witted, their extraordinary responsiveness owed much to the fact that their innovatively designed AI was as focused on figuring out just what the player was playing at as it was at investigating its environment. Every player has their tales to tell of benevolent turtles roaming the land looking for farmers to stroke, or of hate-twisted mandrills, raised on a diet of faeces and children, raining spontaneous fire on defenceless villagers. Every creature was, as promised, yours and yours alone – and every one was, as promised, a mirror of your own behaviour in the world.



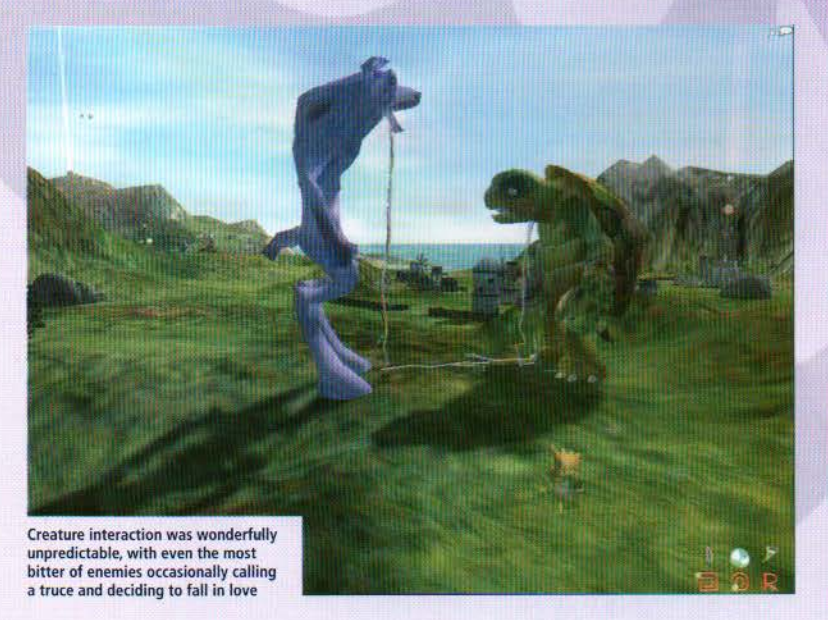
bizarrely, the interaction, which was for many players the main focus of the game, is actually functionally irrelevant at the core level of the game's design.

But if the game didn't need the creatures, then the more telling fact was that the creatures didn't need the game. As frustration at the main game's substantial launch bugs grew, so did a community dedicated to exploring the creatures' potential and creating maps where they could be safely and subtly trained. It became a fascination – creative, challenging, flexible – which eclipsed the more pedestrian satisfactions offered by the commanding and conquering of the game's story mode. And, in that respect, even though it was modelling something closer to a father-and-son model of two near equals rather than the master and underling relationship of a deity and his worshippers, it came nearer to feeling how a god game should. How can you be a god when the game is setting your goals and restricting you with rules? It's this kind of play – aimless, unconstrained, player-controlled – that comes closest to delivering on the omnipotence that we hope a god game will grant us.

Every player has their tales to tell of benevolent turtles roaming the land looking for farmers to stroke, or of hate-twisted mandrills raining fire on defenceless villagers

It's this latter feature which is part of your creature's strange status in the world. Your role is to shape it as an extension of your will – Molyneux conceived the creatures as a way of giving a disembodied power a physical presence in the world – and so, as your creature learns it becomes more like you, and more able to do as you do. Do it well enough and you can tutor yourself out of a job, your creature standing in for you on almost every occasion. But the flipside of this similarity, of course, is there's nothing your creature can do that you couldn't do for yourself. There is simply no need for them in the game: villages could be converted and power struggles could be enacted simply through the player's gradually expanding range of influence and increasing stock of miracles. And so,

It seems, however, that it's hard to escape the pattern of bolting this kind of creative, freeform play on to structured, rule-bound management games. Molyneux's newest game, *The Movies*, makes the same choices in a radically different arena, counting on the setting to bolster the freeform vagueness of the first with some goal-oriented, narrative focus, and for the former to inject some soul into the latter. It's partly because gamers



Creature interaction was wonderfully unpredictable, with even the most bitter of enemies occasionally calling a truce and deciding to fall in love



B&W's engine – particularly on a current PC – still impresses, moving seamlessly from zoomed-in micro management to top-down strategy, with easy high-speed navigation

are a fickle bunch. Show them something that's all play, no structure, like *Electroplankton*, and those that aren't convinced cry out: "Where's the game?" But give them something as metered as *Black & White* or *The Movies* and they set about editing config files to strip out the slightest hint of structure. It's an almost impossible audience to please as the people most likely to flock to the creative freedoms of the sandbox are those most likely to be alienated by the meticulous planning of the managerial game.

So why bother with god games at all? Because by laying bare that tension between freedom and control they demonstrate that every game is a god game. Every developer has to start with light and dark, land and air, animals and people (or NPCs and players, if you like). And every developer, whether they're making a tennis sim or a *Tetris* clone, has to balance the requirements of players who want to feel powerful and autonomous just as much as they want a crafted, controlled experience. What makes *Black & White* so enduringly fascinating is getting to watch that process refracted through three stages: a developer, playing god, creates a world in which a player can play god for themselves, by teaching a creature to play god in their image. 'Find out who you really are' promised the blurb on the box, but in the end you learn as much about games and the people who made them as you do about yourself.

MONKEY SEE

If there was one area in which *Black & White* did disappoint, it was in learning about your own moral instincts. By giving you a clear readout on the moral value of all your decisions, the game didn't so much reveal who you really are as who you really wanted to be. Nearly all the game's scenarios presented a clear choice between being straightforwardly good or malevolently evil, and there was never a sense of complex consequence. Ultimately, what the game did best was highlight the inevitable tension between providing the player with clear feedback on their actions and creating a moral playground with sufficient subtlety to give a true revelation of the player's more subconcious instincts for kindness, cruelty and opportunistic mischief.

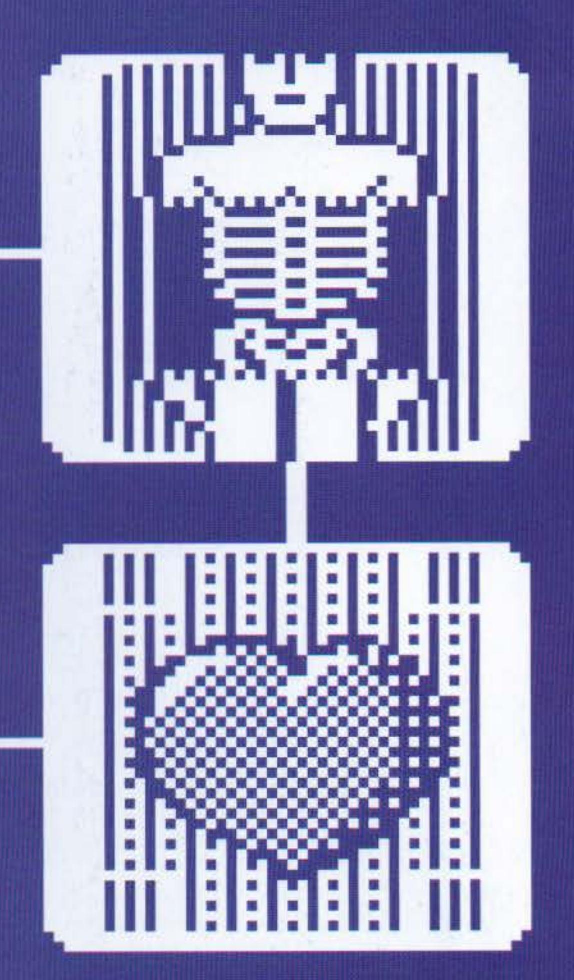
The presence of an enemy god, even only as a floating icon, could feel like an intolerable and threatening invasion of your village's – or your creature's – space



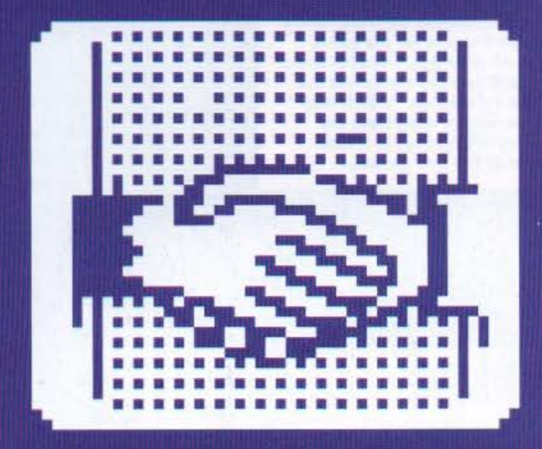
THE MAKING OF... ALTER EGO

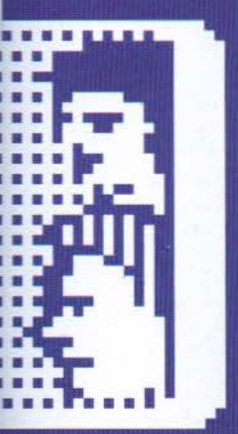
What if you had chosen differently in life? That was the key here, in a game that was the exact opposite of escapism

FORMAT: **APPLE][, C64** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** DEVELOPER: **PATER FAVARO** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1986**









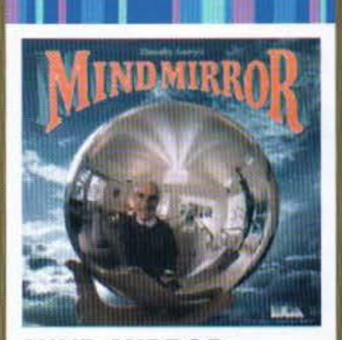
It begins with birth. Actually, slightly before. Should you come out peacefully, or kicking and screaming? You decide. Described in the manual as a 'fantasy role-playing game', *Alter Ego* had little to do with trolls and elves. The role you played was you, or at least a twisted version of you, and the goal was simply to experience life, make your choices, and see what happened. Tread a conventional path or take off in a wild direction and along the way you might even learn something useful about yourself. Your real self, that is.

Nowadays more likely to be found in a New York courthouse advising on complex custody cases, running a seminar on anger management, or working as the house psychologist for the Montel Williams chatshow, in the early 1980s **Dr Peter Favaro** was still a graduate student working his way through college: "I was just a street kid from Brooklyn who happened to like school."

Which is not to say that he wasn't above making his schooldays more likeable. Demonstrating an enviable degree of initiative and chutzpah, his choice of studies would stand him in good stead, and deliver an impeccable gaming pedigree.

"I loved pinball, and I loved computer games, so I contacted Atari and told them I was considering studying the psychology of play in my graduate studies," explains Favaro, "and I thought that they might be able to use me as a person who would

Welcome to Old Age... "It is not white hair that engenders wisdom."



MIND MIRROR

Electronic Arts could also see the potential in psychological games, and even if the publisher couldn't have *Alter Ego*, it wasn't to be outdone. In perhaps the most unusual example of celebrity endorsement, it commissioned controversial psychedelic psychologist Dr Timothy Leary to produce a game. The result was *Mind Mirror*, which allowed the user to explore their personality, or that of others, along with guidance by Leary himself.

Leary was famously unorthodox, and this apparently extended to his design techniques for the game. "He loved *Alter Ego*," recalls Favaro. "He would just call me up and ask me how I did things." Which may go some way to explaining the similarity of approach in certain sections of the two games.



The game's icon and window interface is elegant and clear, with the Commodore version being surprisingly the most appealing, even with that infamous murky brown background colouring

be able to contribute some scientific knowledge to their company." Atari was convinced, and Favaro began consulting for the gaming giant. His offer may have been to teach Atari, but the education went both ways.

"I went back and forth frequently to Atari. I was very active in their corporate think-tank. I had been doing some videogame play research at the time and I would meet with their public relations department. Eventually I started sitting in on tech and game design meetings. I learned a lot about game design."

Certainly enough that when Atari was sold to Warner, and then in Favaro's words "wasn't as much fun", he could put together a proposal for an entirely new and innovative game based around simulating the key moments of a person's entire life.

"The game was originally called *Chaos*, and the idea was that when I was young and very philosophical, and not so cynical as I am now, I believed that life was a series of chaotic events that wound up somehow creating some sort of order as you got older.

"It got bites from Activision and Electronic Arts. EA really wanted it at the time, but I went with Activision because I was more familiar with them. I was more of a person who was tuned into game cartridges than home computer software. They were very, very excited about it because it was a whole new type of game."

Activision had been formed by ex-Atari programmers tired of not getting the recognition and rewards for the games they produced. The recently established company was riding high on its success, and in scenes mostly unimaginable today treated its designers like rock stars.

"They flew us in private jets, sent limousines," recalls Favaro. Promotional trips to Las Vegas or Europe were undertaken in luxury. The allure of being a videogame designer in those days was enough to make psychology seem a very tame alternative.

Technologically, the game now named *Alter Ego* was simple, yet years ahead of its contemporaries. The interface was built around clicking on icons with a pointer, which in these early days had to be joystick controlled. Once an icon was clicked, a window would appear presenting the user with a description of the chaotic event they would have to deal with.

plausible situations was critical, and so Favaro undertook a mammoth research effort that involved him interviewing hundreds of people. Each was asked to describe key events from their past so that he could find the defining moments of people's lives.

"I'd interview anybody who'd talk to me. I asked old people what it was like to be young, and young people what they thought it was like to be old."

He carried a tape recorder around with him everywhere for nearly a year. Although exhausting work, it wasn't always such a burden: he was still finding ways to make what could have been a chore more likeable. "I'd use it as an excuse to go to bars. It was a great way to pick up undergraduate students. That was not exactly scientific."

Scientific or not, it was certainly comprehensive. Once the interviews were completed and written up they had to be

Instead of the traditional roleplaying stalwarts, Alter Ego players needed to cultivate gentleness and trustworthiness

The core of the game lay in these vignettes, each a series of linked pages, coded using marked-up text similar to modern web-scripting. Links led from page to page depending on the player's choices and attributes. Instead of the traditional roleplaying stalwarts of strength, dexterity and charisma, *Alter Ego* players needed to cultivate gentleness, thoughtfulness and trustworthiness. These values shifted based on the player's responses to the situation. Lie to your parents as a child, and you might suffer a drop in your trustworthiness and familial scores, but perhaps experience an increase in confidence that would help you later in life. By examining the results of your choices it was hoped that you could gain insight into your own character.

Constructing a large number of

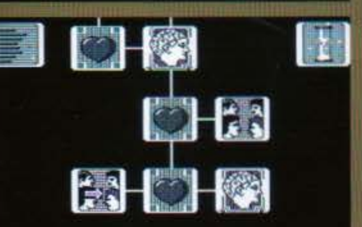
structured. This took the form of an immense matrix of events, indexed by age and category; whether the event was emotional, familial, physical and so on. These would eventually form the 'life stages' and choices for the final game, which allowed the player to choose an aspect of life they were interested in without revealing too many details in advance.

Not all experiences were chosen for inclusion in the game. "I was looking for both the very common and the very odd," remembers Favaro. The inclusion of the unusual events gave an important extra level of plausibility. We've all had unusual things happen to us, and a life simulated without them would have seemed flat and unrealistic. Favaro took the experiences that had been related to him and then reworked the situations as dilemmas. Some



Despite there being entirely separate male and female versions of *Alter Ego*, the games' packaging was largely identical. Fortunately the game has aged somewhat better than its cover might suggest





Life stages can be omitted, which is useful for subsequent replays. As in real life, being a baby might be interesting the first time you try it, but it may not be something you'll want to repeat over and over

ALTER EGO

PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT PROFILE

Use the arrow keys to move the pointer next to a response. Press SPACE to select that response

LET ME SELECT MY OWN PERSONALITY

LET COMPUTER SELECT MY PERSONALITY

LET COMPUTER SELECT MY PERSONALITY THEN LET ME EXAMINE OR EDIT IT

LOAD A PREVIOUS GAME

would be simply talking through problems with friends, others moral questions with the occasional more exotic encounter. With his knowledge of developmental psychology, together with a little artistic licence, a pre-birth and infancy section was added for completeness, and Favaro had his game, a simulation of life from before birth to death, hopefully in happy old age.

Player interaction took the form of a suitable combination of mood and action from a restricted list to respond to the situation. As in life, not all situations could be 'won', and how you coped with failure was as illuminating as how you coped with success. The game's simplicity meant that there were no worries with controls, no learning curve, no moving from one location to another, just a series of slices from life with your response to events determining your character, and thus future options. If a game is a series of interesting choices, then *Alter Ego* is the pure form.

Each scene was written up in the same accessible, humorous text that Favaro uses in his textbooks, but the game was far from trivial. It could be extremely serious when the situation required it. A true simulation could hardly flinch from some of the unpleasant aspects of existence.

"You could choose whether or not to participate in a gang rape," recalls Favaro. "In those days it was pretty much shocking that anyone would even try to include that in a videogame. The most violence that was in games in those days was a couple of little cartoon characters shooting little pixels at one another."

Unsurprisingly, Activision was somewhat wary. "It was the first videogame to ever come with a maturity warning on it, because of the sex and violence," says Favaro. "They asked me to take some of that out of there, and I wouldn't. I actually stood my ground on all their nervousness on what the game contained."

The release of the game proved him right. There was absolutely no trouble over the explicit content, which, for those looking for a lighter experience, could be skipped. The game was clearly aimed at the mature user, and treated potentially delicate areas with the appropriate gravity. As a critical and commercial success, it comfortably allowed Favaro to complete his studies and establish a psychological practice.

The longer-term legacy of *Alter Ego* is difficult to determine. Given the mouse, icon and hyperlinked structure, an internet adaptation was inevitable, and a faithful conversion, written by Dan Fabulich with Favaro's blessing and cooperation, can be found online (visit theblackforge.net) and yet no one has taken the premise further. So *Alter Ego* remains an odd blip of history, a moment where entertainment and insight combined to show what computer games could achieve, given a chance. Games have largely stuck with those tried and trusted cartoon characters shooting pixels at each other, and despite hopes that *Alter Ego* might represent 'the next big thing' in the field, psychology does not seem to have been revolutionised quite yet.

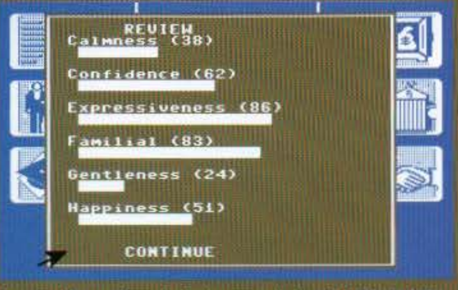
"I'm most proud of that game. It's the thing I'm gladdest I did," concludes Favaro. An odd admission, perhaps, from someone who spends his time helping real people with real problems, but he still believes in the game's potential. So he's working on a sequel. Can the psychological game make a mark in the 21st century, when it failed in the 20th? We'll find out when it launches towards the end of next year.



PROJECTION

In keeping with his brief at Atari, Favaro used his psychological knowledge to shape the way the text of the vignettes was written. He deliberately kept descriptions short and low on detail, explicitly relying on the reader's imagination to fill in the missing details and, crucially, add emotional resonance.

This use of the 'projective hypothesis', the same technique used by Rorshach ink blot tests to examine the viewer's mental state, combined with Favaro's extremely readable style and dry, sarcastic humour, give the vignettes an oddly personal relevance. Only the occasional specifically American cultural reference jars the non-native reader. The universal themes of life, death, trust and friendship mean that 20 years haven't dated the scenes at all. The game was also uniquely split into male and female versions, and it is interesting to see the same situation appear in both versions, but approached from different perspectives.



Just as with any other roleplaying game, the key is in the statistics. In contrast to the usual fantastical selection – strength, sword skills, marksmanship – *Alter Ego*'s are more Freud than Jung

The operation is a failure. You die on the operating table due to complications. This game is over.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **COMPANY NAME:** Ideaworks3D

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 1999

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 65

■ **HEAD OF STUDIO:** Adam Medhurst (development director)

■ **KEY STAFF:**
Frazer Wilson (CEO), Alex Caccia (COO), Thor Gunnarsson (VP, business development), Robert Bjarnason (CTO), Tim Closs (director, studio technology), Brian Pearson (director, R&D)

idea WORKS3D!



■ **URL:** www.ideaworks3d.com







Ideaworks' racer *System Rush* carries influences from the likes of *Wipeout* and later *F-Zeroes*

■ **LOCATION:**
Central London

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**
System Rush (Symbian, 2005), *NFS: Most Wanted* (BREW, 2005), *NFS: Underground 2* (BREW, 2005), *The Sims 2 Mobile* (Java, BREW, 2005), *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* (Symbian, 2003; BREW, 2005), *Colin McRae Rally 2005* (Symbian, 2004), *The Sims Bustin' Out* (Symbian, 2004), *Tomb Raider* (Windows Mobile, 2001; Symbian, 2003)

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Various undisclosed projects for current and next-generation mobile devices in all major territories

■ **PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNOLOGY**
"Ideaworks3D is a BAFTA-award winning independent mobile game development studio, specialising in the creation of leading-edge 3D console-class games and related technology for high-end mobile phones.

"With over five years of R&D in mobile multimedia, rendering, compression and networking technology, we deliver enabling software and solutions for the development and deployment of 3D, connected and multiplayer games. Since 2003, our internally developed game engine and connected game platforms are at the heart of multiple BREW, Symbian OS and Java games in the market from the leading publishers in the industry.

"If you think mobile gaming is about 2D Java games, think again. Our focus is on creating console-quality, cutting-edge 3D connected games. We take the best techniques and practices from the current-gen console/PC development world. Then we extend them, mix them with the sneakiest old-school tricks from PS1/16bit/8bit days, link the results together via our connected game servers and apply the entire mix to mobile. That's why our games are currently the talk of the industry.

"The console development lifecycle is three to five years. In mobile, we're seeing exciting hardware developments almost every month. It's a race to keep up with the turnover of ideas in mobile software, hardware, game delivery and content. That's why flexibility, adaptability and plain old raw talent are prerequisites for all members of our studio."





Ideaworks' translations of *Need For Speed Underground 2* (left) and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* offer some of the most accomplished polygon-driven graphics yet seen in mobile gaming environments

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

The public face of games

It's always been hard for developers to benefit from government cash, but a clutch of regional game initiatives may be about to change that



www.gamerepublic.co.uk
www.gamealliance.net
www.em-media.org.uk
www.gamehorizon.net
www.pixel-lab.co.uk

Usually when people start to talk about convergence between games and films, you know it's time to start another conversation. But there is at least one area where the parallels (if not the convergence) are worth pursuing: regional development. Granted it's not the sexiest subject in the world, but whatever you may think about the output of the UK film industry, there's no doubting its success in raising money for production as well as persuading filmmakers from around the world to spend their money within the UK. Perhaps what's more surprising is that some of this cash and support is provided by the government through the Film Council. Film, it seems, can be supported by the taxpayer. Videogames, on the other hand, despite being much more successful in terms of the UK's balance of trade with the rest of the world, don't receive the same benefits. And even more damning, because filmmaking has been around much longer than games, anyone who wants to establish a similar network of regional bodies for game development has to work within the screen agency infrastructure already set up for film development. Back to the non sequitur of film/game convergence.

It's a situation that's annoyed and tantilised the game industry for years, even as various organisations, such as Game Horizon in the north east and Game Alliance in the north west of England, have set up to make a difference. Originally formed in 1999 as the M62 Game Network, Game Alliance covers the Liverpool/Manchester area, but despite its longevity, coordinator **Maria Stukoff** says it continues to face an uphill struggle for recognition.



Film, it seems, can be supported by the taxpayer. Videogames don't receive the same benefits

"Our regional development agencies have been slow to act and even slower to support the digital interactive media," she explains. "Even getting someone to attend a recent event specifically designed for studio heads and public sector executives was problematic and futile. It was also disappointing there was no representation from the North West



Maria Stukoff, coordinator, Game Alliance



Michael Crampton, general manager, Game Republic



Because of the way the UK is divided into regional development agencies, each game agency has to work within the existing infrastructure. In some cases it's been a big success, such as Game Republic, which works with Yorkshire First and Screen Yorkshire. Other regions haven't found funding so easy to obtain

Regional Development Agency at the recent DTI UK Game sector conference."

Part of the problem is that the government expects each region to react to its local situation, and for some areas of the UK videogames have never been a significant industry. Other areas, such as the north west, have suffered because they haven't been able to access funding from the higher echelons within their own region.

There have been success stories, however. Set up by Yorkshire Forward and local film agency Screen Yorkshire, Game Republic has provided a great example of how regional bodies can synergise the local development community. Covering development hotspots such as Sheffield and Leeds within its Yorkshire and Humberside area, Game Republic started off running the usual selection of meetings and finding support for trade missions and business development. It's since gone on to launch its prototype production scheme, GRIPP (see 'Getting more GRIPP').

And while the UK industry as a whole has experienced hard times, according to general manager **Michael Crampton**, since Game Republic's inception seven new companies have been established in the region, 200 additional personnel have been employed, and the value of the videogame industry to the region has increased by £14 million.



Toby Barnes, founder, Pixel Lab

Crampton says it's not been an easy process, however: "From the industry point of view, we've got to change perceptions that regional alliances can make a difference. From a development agency point of view, we've to ensure games and interactive entertainment are regarded as culturally and economically significant to the region as film and television production."

But perhaps the biggest problem is how to spread such local success around. One notable reaction to that of Game Republic has been a perceived elastification of its borders, with developers from neighbouring regions showing interest in getting involved. "There is an element of competition between the regions and no one wants to be left behind," Crampton says. "A ripple effect is currently taking place across the regions as they catch up and then try to do even better. That's a positive thing for the industry."

According to **Toby Barnes**, who until recently ran the game agency at EM Media, which handles the east midlands area, it's this sort of attitude that people running local game initiatives hope will lift everyones' boat.

"On a personal level, heads of the regional games bodies regularly meet up and share ideas and there's ongoing work to ensure there are as few overlaps where possible," he says. "Where it's more tricky is at the higher Regional Development Agency level, because there it's a zero sum game with everyone competing for finite resources."

It's for this reason that Barnes, who has set up his own game development agency, Pixel Lab, has proposed the idea of a Games Council. "I think there's a definite need for some form of objective unifying body," he argues. "It may be an amalgamation of the trade bodies funded by central government or a new form of organisation working along similar models as the Film Council. This would allow the body to work in areas not already covered by economically driven trade bodies, such as archiving, cultural discussion and diversity."

Discussed in the recent meeting between the various regional game initiatives and the departments of Trade and Industry and Culture, Media and Sport, it's still early stages, but Barnes hopes to put together a group to take the idea further. "It's not clear what this council would look like, but the intention is to spark debate, and capture the industry's opinions," he says. "Our goal is to ensure the growth and sustainability of the UK games industry."



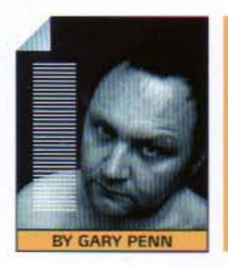
Getting more GRIPP

One of the most interesting regional initiatives has been Game Republic's Integrated Prototype Production (GRIPP) project. A structured process, it provides developers with some funding and other support to help take their game ideas through to prototypes. Each project accepted into GRIPP can be funded up to £50,000, matching £50,000 of investment from the developer itself. The goal is to create a demo that can then be used to attract further funds either from other investors or via the standard publisher route.

Alternatively, it may be decided at that point to halt the project because it's not working out. The funding only needs to be repaid, plus a small margin, if a game is commercially released.

"To date we've identified ten potentially viable projects of which four were allocated financial support from public funding and three just received access to resources and industry support," reveals Michael Crampton. Of those seven, five prototypes are currently in production.

Perhaps more exciting, however, is the news that Game Republic is making parts of the GRIPP framework, such as its evaluation and development processes, available to other regional game organisations, with the north west's Game Alliance and the north east's Game Horizon set to roll out the scheme to their members, too.



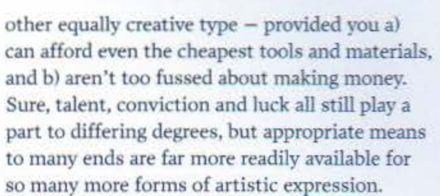
MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Pulling on the reins

While the distance between rich and poor grows ever wider in the real world, the gap between professionals and amateurs and everyday folk is rapidly disappearing in the realms of entertainment media. Technology is increasingly powerful and convenient, less expensive and easier to use. There are fewer external wires, too.

Where once you had more chance of making it with the Queen than making a record or book or film or TV show or anything of that ilk widely available, now anyone can do anything and put it in the hands of everyone. The only tricky bit is making the world aware of your work – although Arctic Monkeys certainly managed to make an impression through their internet presence.

It's an unprecedented and exciting time to be a budding writer, musician, filmmaker or other equally creative type – provided you a) can afford even the cheapest tools and materials, and b) aren't too fussed about making money. Sure, talent, conviction and luck all still play a part to differing degrees, but appropriate means to many ends are far more readily available for so many more forms of artistic expression.



Writers can always express themselves and bring their thoughts to life verbally or through pen and paper. Musicians can use mouths or fingers (with or without the aid of instruments). Filmmakers can take advantage of inexpensive cameras and editing facilities. The barriers between artist and medium are minimal.

Computer and videogames, on the other hand... When designing computer and videogames, especially original ones, it's not always convenient to quickly test ideas. I don't know a designer who doesn't yearn for a tool to reduce the time and space between dream and reality – some form of 'sketchpad' to play with basic toys. Sadly, no such tool exists.

Computer and videogame designers make a great many decisions about how to shape their work, sometimes without thinking, without exploring alternatives, without considering the implications, just because it feels right. Acting on undocumented instinct means so much is lost – fundamental rules to benefit less naturally accomplished designers.

Every new turn potentially ties tighter knots. Is a digital or analogue button most appropriate to instigate an action? Is the action performed when the button is pressed or released, immediately or after a time? And so on.

There's no convenient means of testing these possibilities or the essence of play – be it basic concepts, simple actions, interactions and reactions, cause and effect or rules. There's only so much can be done on paper. The bigger the project, the more it feels like building pyramids from grains of sand. Too much development time is spent on tedious low-level shit.

Working on monthly magazines you go through the process of creating a product 12 or so times a year, which means you quickly understand how it works and it becomes second nature, and you can focus on exploiting the content and more confidently deal with any issues that arise. In the same time it takes to make one game these days, a magazine team might have been through their process 48 times.

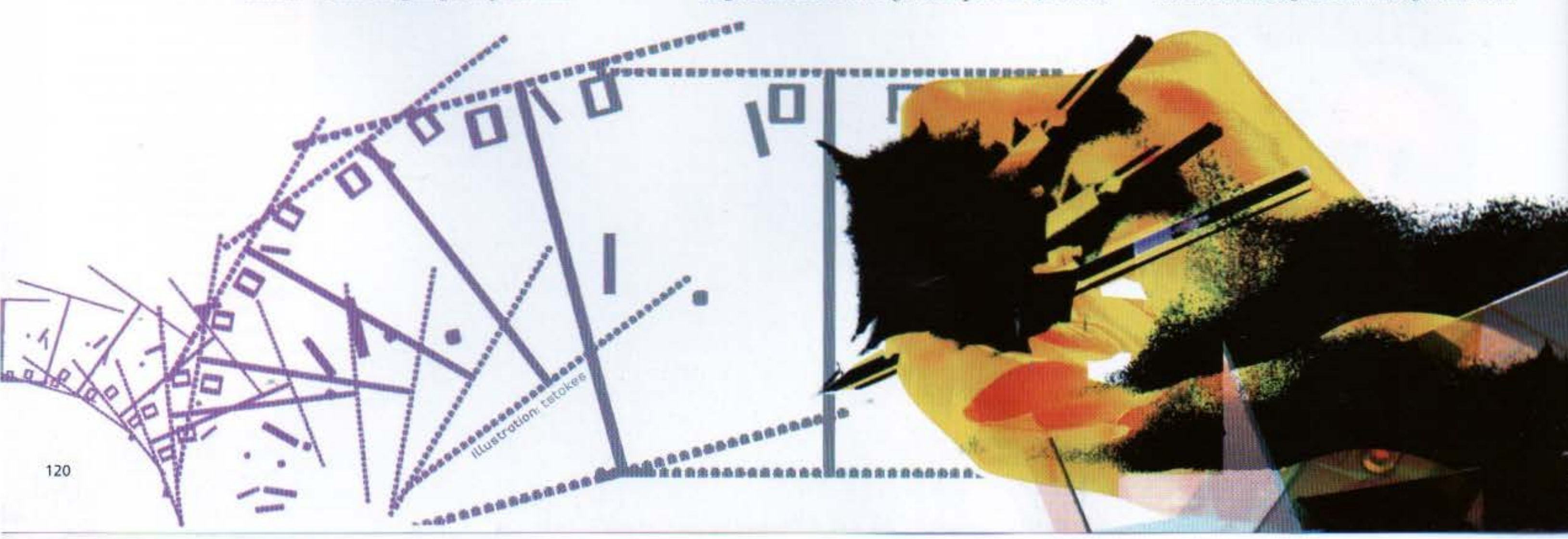
We need that repetition and speed of revision for improved familiarity with the process of making a product. It occurs naturally in projects: designing something, discovering it doesn't work or could work better, revising it, potentially interfering with everything else to encourage amendments or additions... typically over years with a single product. The learning curve is steeper but more effective if revisions are between versions or whole projects.

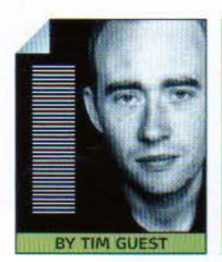
Every time anything is built from the ground up there are usually a great many assumptions, but it's almost always all new components. When you build a game, all you can do is use the established works as references and prototypes. But so many rules are not considered – assumed only by the context or objectives. For example, if play takes place in a real city, you expect everything to be 'normal'. But more abstract games such as *Pong*... does play take place in air or water or some other medium? How accurate are the natural rules? What materials are used? An infinite number of possibilities to shape, direct, limit.

The temptation to allow players to do what they want, when they want, where they want, how they want and why they want is irresistible, especially since the success of the *GTA* series. But so-called 'freeform sandbox emergent gameplay' (or 'play', as it's better known) becomes stale without direction, structure and boundaries to explore and push (even if the challenges are informal and delivered by peers with tales of what they found and did).

Constraints are important as an aid to inspiration. They make exploitation and creation more satisfying. What you can't do can often make play more interesting than what you can.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki




BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Portraits of an online world

Every writer knows the feeling that someone else is working on the same story. You can sense them out there, mapping out the same territory, stalking the same narrative prey. It encourages a kind of friendly enmity – every writer wishes another writer well, but there's always the hope that you'll get your story told before anyone else gets the chance. Within virtual worlds, the sense of someone else out there is all the clearer; sometimes, as you walk the exotic landscape, feeling like a virtual pioneer, you can actually see the competition strolling by.

I've written in **Edge** before about a misunderstanding, originating from this column, which raised the hackles of both Linden Labs – the maker of the virtual world *Second Life* – and more specifically its resident embedded journalist, Hamlet Linden.

> Sometimes, as you walk the exotic landscape, feeling like a virtual pioneer, you can actually see the competition strolling by

Since then, it has become clearer that Hamlet and I are working on telling stories that are complementary, but there's now no way to ignore our friendship's rocky beginning. It's a relief, then, to encounter someone else strolling the simulated landscapes of our new dreamworlds, but documenting them in an entirely different way.

I met **Robbie Cooper** after catching sight of a flyer for his exhibition, Alter Ego. In it, Cooper's photos of real-world MMORPG players were hung next to images of their online selves. There was a kid with multiple sclerosis whose oxygen-providing face mask strangely echoed his *Star Wars Galaxies* bounty-hunter character's boxy helmet. There was a fat player with a thin avatar. A mother who, through the electronic looking glass, had become a punk. In the year or so since then, Robbie's name has cropped up again and again in virtual-world review websites and discussion boards. No one else had so clearly and so directly illustrated the duality of our virtual lives.

I met with Robbie recently, to talk about his own journeys across the real Earth, and through the many imaginary virtual Earths we have created, photographing both the real and the nonexistent. Robbie was the first person I'd met who had actually visited the near-mythical Chinese 'virtual sweatshops', where MMORPG players earn real-world wages. "They weren't so busy when I went," Robbie said. "The players weren't actually sleeping where they worked."

In Korea, Robbie met pro-gamers who advertised mobile phones. In China, Robbie found, *World Of WarCraft* was king. "When I got to China," he said, "*World Of WarCraft* had a joint advertising campaign with Coca-Cola. That's how mainstream it is." (Robbie plans to visit Kenya next, to look at LAN parties on the African continent.)

I asked him how he found subjects for his portraits. "In Asia, it's very easy; you just walk into a PC-Bang [internet café] and ask people. In America, I put out callouts on the game websites. At one point we were getting 50 emails a day."

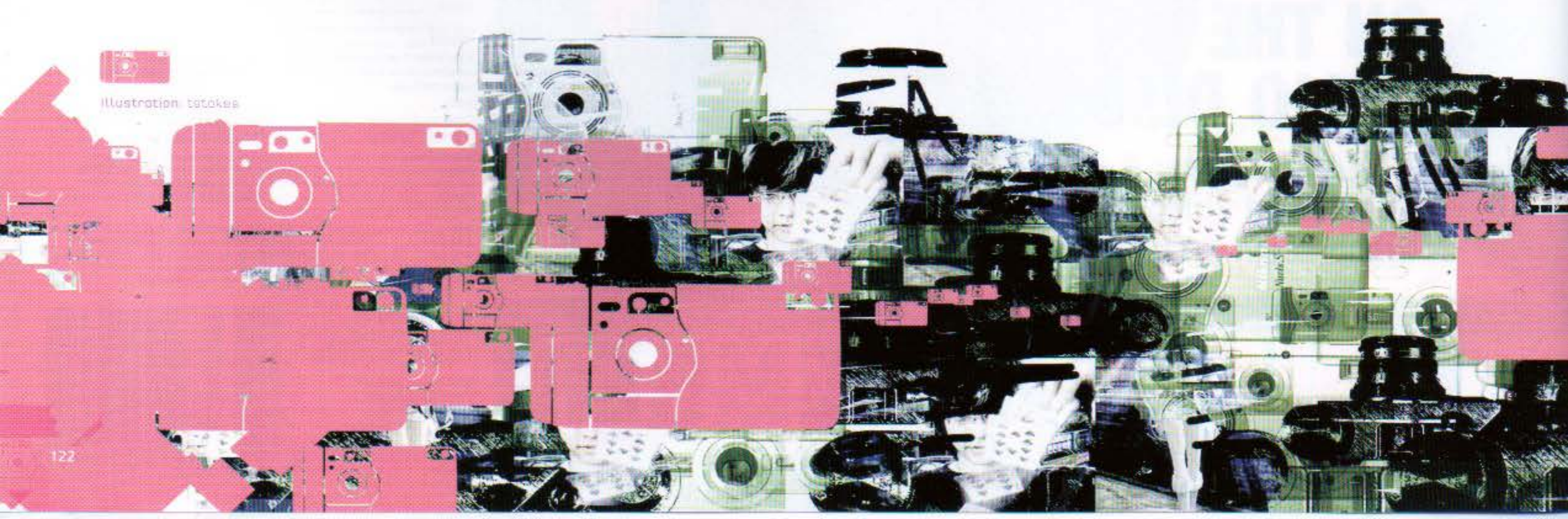
So how does he choose which people to approach with his camera? "We've all heard a lot of stories about people meeting and getting married, and making friends, and all that. I wanted to move on from there and find other stories. Some of the replies I received were pretty amazing.

"One of the most fascinating was Bill the trucker, who transports gold for the Federal Reserve. He drives this big 18-wheeler across the freeways of America. If he has a police escort, it'll attract attention, so it's usually just him in the cab with a few assault rifles, and sometimes as much as a hundred million dollars worth of gold in the back. In the evenings, he stops at wifi-enabled truckstops and plays *Eve Online* – where he pilots a big spaceship, protecting his virtual loot against hostile players. The two activities mirrored each other.

"What's interesting about this project is that people talk about it; I get immediate feedback. I've never had that with photography before. People talk about it online, on websites and bulletin boards. Also, even in the gallery openings. A lot of time you go to an opening, people talk about other stuff. At Alter Ego, people actually talk about the pictures and the issues around them. You get non-gamers talking about the personas you might use in a social situation."

Photography is the story of the gaze: our gaze; the gaze of the photographer; the gaze of the subject. In virtual worlds, Robbie has found that the gaze of the player is often already caught elsewhere. "Most people were comfortable with being photographed," Cooper said, but this comes with a caveat: "In China and Korea, I asked people in PC-Bangs. Two thirds said yes, a third said no. But some people were so entranced, you couldn't actually get them to look away from the computer screen."

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta


Illustration: tetokes


BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

The graphics... and the artistry

I never really got into *Ico*, despite the fact I can appreciate almost everything about it. The almost invisible interface, the perfect structure, the pacing; it's an incredibly pure videogame, and it frustrated me that I never enjoyed it as much as I felt I should. In much the same way I wish I could enjoy challenging art house cinema as much as some of my friends, or bring myself to read the sorts of books which aren't on sale in airports, I simply can't be bothered with more avante garde games.

Oh, for sure, I like my games original. I just can't be arsed with anything that challenges my perceptions of what a game should be. *Killer 7*, for example, literally made blood foam from my ears. "We are in a tight spot." Damn right you are: you're jammed up your own sphincter.

The truth is, I'm more mainstream in my tastes than I'd sometimes like to admit. They say you get more conservative as you get older, and there's no question that I'm becoming a lot less flexible in the choice of games I play.

I live in constant hope that I'll have my passion for gaming suddenly refreshed by some challenging, leftfield meisterwerk. With this hope in mind, I bought *Shadow Of The Colossus*. As suspected, it's a pigeon-step closer to the mainstream than *Ico*, and though the gameplay is a tad repetitive, I enjoyed it a pigeon-step more than its predecessor.

However, what I really enjoyed about it – much as I did with *Ico* – were its graphics. Actually, graphics seems too harsh a word to describe the beauty on display here. What I really appreciated was its artistry. Despite the fact *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *Ico* are running on hardware that we're told is 'last generation', they look far and away more sublime and soulful than anything I've yet seen from the next generation. Admittedly, the visuals in *Shadow Of The Colossus* are not perfect – there are glitches, and the framerate could be better. But overall, it's a gorgeous, awe-inspiring work of art. And the reason it's so beautiful has precisely nothing to do with technology.

When you look at Xbox 360 games, what do you think? I think: 'Peh'. Off the top of my head I could name half a dozen random, old-gen games which look better than anything I've seen thus far for the Xbox 360, and part of the problem is that they're relying on technology at the expense of artistry. Too many games lack a soul, and a part of that is too many games are soulless depictions of a mundane reality, rather than a reflection of an artistic point of view.

> "They say you get more conservative as you get older, and there's no question that I'm becoming a lot less flexible in the games I play"

For me the difference between *Doom 3* and *Quake 4* – gameplay aside – is that *Doom 3* is a game where art dictated the technology, while with *Quake 4* it's the other way around.

I grow weary of wandering round the same urban landscapes, and warehouses, and semi-organic, sci-fi tunnels. I'd be a lot more welcoming to them if there was some feeling – some vision – gone into their depiction, but no. Every warehouse is identical to the last. Every alien installation is near identical. Every monster looks identical. You look at screenshots or video of the supposed first wave of Xbox 360 games, and they all look like the same game. None of them have a distinct, artistic vision. They're letting technology (and other games) decide how they should look.

Technology keeps being thrown at games, without anyone pausing to question why. What's the benefit of spending money for smoother framerates and more polygons if what they're being used for is no more – or actually less – compelling than what we already have?

An artist – a true artist – should be able to create something surprising, and thought-provoking, and engaging with whatever tools he has to hand. Does having a bigger, newer brush make you a better painter? Would the Mona Lisa have been improved if Da Vinci had covered it with glitter and fluorescent paint?

It so often seems that game graphics are an afterthought. Yes, we all know the gameplay is the most important thing, but as technology moves forward the role of the artist seems to have diminished. They design buildings that look like real buildings – or, at least, like things they've seen in other games – and let the graphics engine do the job of lighting it, and making it look pretty. They've become architects and technicians, rather than painters.

Quake 4, *Gears Of War*, *Perfect Dark Zero*, *Saint's Row*, *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, and so on, all look like things we've seen before. Even *Kameo* is an over-designed grab-bag of fantasy clichés. Not a single 360 game inspires any sense of awe. It's not eye candy – it's eye porridge. Take a look at the trailer for *Quake 4* – it sums up everything wrong with these games. A fit-inducing strobe through hackneyed imagery, topped off by an unintentionally hilarious script and music that veers from a militaristic beat to bluegrass, edited together by someone without a shred of artistic vision.

The best engine, the most powerful tech – none of it matters. You can give a monkey the same paint and canvas as Da Vinci, but chances are he's not going to recreate the Mona Lisa.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television

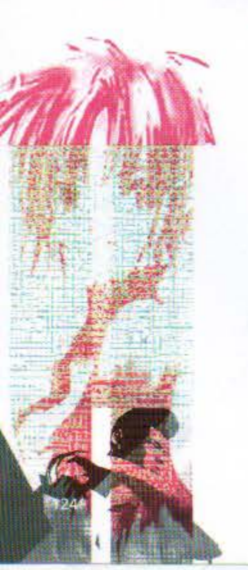
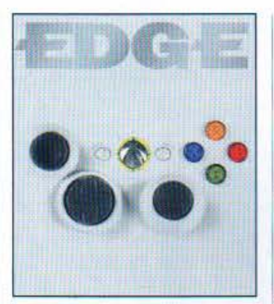




Illustration: tstokes





Issue 157

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Should I sell my 360 when it arrives?

Having recently gotten the eBay bug, I'm contemplating whether or not to sell my 360 when it arrives on December 2nd for a tidy grey sum on top of the RRP, then save my money for a PS3 next year? I'm admittedly quite excited at the prospect of getting a 360 and playing hi-def *PGR3* online, but I also know now would be the time to make a large sum of money. Your thoughts...
danclarke

I think anyone who does this should be strung up and quartered. If you don't want the machine, then don't buy it, but don't deprive another person who does want the console from getting it at a fair price so you can make some money. If you do, you're scum.
Daniel_M

Screw the ethics, if people are seriously stupid enough to pay over $5,000 for a slightly souped-up Xbox they deserve to be overcharged. We should take bets on how much you'll get for it – I'm saying $2,500!
shanyi

Microsoft seems to have developed a rather odd view of what the word 'launch' actually means when it comes to the Xbox 360. First, we have the launch games to be ready for the arrival of the new console. These launch games may not in fact be ready for the day of release; rather they will be ready in the 'launch window' – this window apparently covers a full 12 months after the new console's release (I have purposely used the word 'release' due to the vagaries of the word 'launch', which could be very confusing for any MS employees).

We then have the worldwide launch of the new console. This time 'launch' does actually mean 'date of release'; however, the amount of units delivered are so few that the majority of potential buyers have no chance of getting hold of a system until the new year.

So when is a launch not a launch? Well, I would suggest that the placing of ten units in each territory does not count as a launch – it is in fact an exercise in PR and the actual launch will be some time next year when there are actually enough units for people to buy one. Should you do another interview with J Allard and he mentions the worldwide launch, please poke him with a pointy stick.

I work to tight deadlines, but I am considering taking up the MS interpretation of launch as it will be very helpful if I can plan a project (I wonder if MS Project already has this functionality built in?) that has a definite launch date – give or take 12 months! Do you think it will wash?

All I have to do now is find a replacement Christmas present.
Steve Golden

There's no question that the Xbox 360 launch has had its frustrations, but isn't it better that around 70,000 UK gamers are able to get the machine now, rather than everyone having to wait ten months for a staggered release, as happened with PSP?

Allard has every reason to be proud of the 360, but this complete reversal of the truth, combined with his avoidance of the Revolution, is embarrassing

Mr Allard may be 'bullish' (**E**157), but he also veers off into something similar, though with some letters rearranged and a 't' added at the end. He may be "perfectly satisfied with the 24fps" he gets at the movie theatre, but he's actually getting 48fps. The film projector lights each frame twice, which is necessary to attain persistence of vision. This phenomenon gives the mind the illusion of uninterrupted motion, and occurs when the retina registers around 50 images per second.

Another point he makes is that he hopes Sony comes around to the Microsoft point of view, which is to "grow the industry instead of fighting for share amongst the hardcore." Very bullish of Mr Allard indeed, with *Halo* and *Halo 2* being the flagship titles of the Xbox, whilst Sony has given us EyeToy, *SingStar* and most recently *Buzz*. He surely has every reason to be proud of the 360, but this complete reversal of the truth, combined with his avoidance of responding to anything concerning the Revolution, is embarrassing. It appears that bullishness has its limits when confronted with even only the possibility of a true breaking of boundaries in a way that no one at Microsoft could ever have dreamed of.
Jeroen van der Valk

Reviews are difficult. To try to describe an experience in a short piece of text or, worse, in a single one-to-ten rating, is hard if not impossible. As a long-time **Edge** reader I find that **Edge**'s game reviews are the best there are, but the reviews section is still the part of the magazine I dislike the most. It strikes me that the entire idea of such a judging process goes against the fine-tuned sensibility, passion for nuance that the magazine otherwise demonstrates for games.

I would assume that **Edge** regrets some of its reviews (*Ico*, *Half-Life*, *PilotWings*, and *Alien Vs Predator* on the Jaguar, perhaps?) just as I assume the Motion Picture Academy wish they had given films like Apocalypse Now, Blade Runner and Citizen Kane a Best Picture nod.

Interestingly, **Edge** has two other sections that review games – Time Extend and Now Playing. These should not be needed, but they serve as an interesting peek into which games actually stuck once the hectic review process was completed. Perhaps time is the factor?

A game can offer you a new experience every time you play it and can contain a very high level of sophistication that is derived from a complex of set of factors. A game cannot be directed directly by a human who can design the game experience, but rather the developer sets up an arena for events to unfold, and only with time can that arena's potential be fully explored. The developer can shortcut this problem by preparing events and scenarios,





Eskil Steenberg wonders if a game of *Half-Life 2*'s calibre be summed up in a review. And is it better than *Doom 2*?

but they will ring hollow on more careful examination.

Because a game is not a fleeting experience, it's an experience that can be had over and over, and only after the initial buzz wears off can one properly gauge the finer mechanics of a game. It's easy to like a game for all its bells and whistles but a truly great game is more about mechanics then features.

Recently I played through *Half-Life 2* for the second time and *Doom 2* for probably the fifth time. Although *HL2* was hugely impressive when I first played it, it now felt like it had already showed me all it had to offer while *Doom 2* still packed the same adrenaline punch it did ten years ago.

Wipeout felt flawed when I first played it. These flaws have since been fixed in sequels but this has changed the way the game plays in a way that makes me now, years later, go back to the original to appreciate its simplicity. With time, one looks beyond expectations and starts to accept a game for what it really is.

Obviously a review is a subjective opinion and no opinion can ever be right or wrong, but I fear that reviews are partially to blame for the way games are made. Games today are made to give a good first impression to reviewers with FMV, scripted events, environments and wcharacters. Huge amounts are spent on content that the player will only appreciate once. It may be closer to that elusive goal of 'interactive movie' but it's further away from the things that make me love games as games.

Half-Life 2 now felt like it had already showed me all it had to offer while Doom 2 still packed the same adrenaline punch it did ten years ago

Games like *Quake*, *Bomberman*, *Counter-Strike* and *Asteroids*, which are based on gameplay and not content, are few and far between. The videogame industry probably doesn't want us to play the same games over and over, they want us to buy new games. (I assume that *Counter-Strike* has cost the industry quite a lot.) But it's our duty as gaming aficionados to fight this trend of hollow set-pieces.

Perhaps games shouldn't ever receive review scores of anything higher then eight, and then a year later they could be promoted to a nine or a ten? It's probably not something that would ever work, and therefore a game developer's goal should be to end up in Time Extend or Now Playing rather then getting that 'high out of ten' score.
Eskil Steenberg

What you're saluting with *Quake*, *Bomberman*, *Counter-Strike* and *Asteroids* are mostly multiplayer games with little in the way of narrative and everything in the way of replayability, but how many people would agree that durability should be the key factor in determining whether or not something is a classic? You're right, though: durability isn't something that can be accurately assessed in a timely review.

F

Topic: Games that drive me missus potty...

Any *Final Fantasy game* – the random battle music kicks in and she's grimacing and eyebrow raising. Any EA-branded game. (Yep, I know it's shameful, but I like to bring out the Tiger and his clubs.) It's the intro she hates: 'EA Sports... it's in the game!'
chesterjeeb

I'm lucky enough to have a wife that loves to watch and sometimes play (with great comedy value) FPSes, especially *Halo* and *Battlefield 2*. But if I dare to put *Project Gotham 2* or any other racing game near my Xbox I get it in the ear because it's 'boring'. She's over the moon that I've preordered *PGR3* with my 360! *PDZ* and *COD2* should keep her quiet, though.
HuntKillJoy

You lucky, lucky bastard. My wife hates all games, consoles, computers, arcade machines, fruit machines and digital television. She would rather watch VHS than DVD. She is happy with just BBC1 and ITV1 thank you very much. She needs assistance just to turn on a computer. She thinks all videogames are pointless (discuss) and that there are more important things that I could be doing such as housework or DIY. Still, she's a great shag.
PiperUK

Anything really, but she does seem to particularly respond to games that include gunfire sound effects...
Deadman

I point out the *Manhunt* cover every time my girlfriend and I wander into a game store. She turns away in disgust every time and keeps saying she can't believe I played the game and actually liked it. And she doesn't let me buy *DOA: Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. Grrr! She bought me a GB Micro recently, and *Paper Mario* before that. Typical. I bet she gets me *Super Princess Peach*, too.
hylian_elf

I noticed a neat little theme running through **E**156. The issue behind stories in computer games has become far bigger now that the capability of implementing them but also the need to supply them has become augmented. Shanyi's post from the **Edge** forum, saying that all most games need is an objective, is admirable but is not to say that stories are completely irrelevant. Having recently started on *Metroid Fusion* once again, it would be hard to pin down the story and in fact the game is made up almost exclusively of objectives; however, having just uncovered a major twist in the story, I received a feeling I last recall feeling during an episode of 24, although perhaps not as drawn out. Games have an almost unique ability to thrill due to their 'hyper-interactivity' in comparison to other media but subtlety is the buzzword here.

As a fledging writer myself, I was elated to hear that you had done an interview with the likes of Simon Pegg and Peter Serafinowicz, two personal heroes of mine. As a perfect example, *Half-Life 2* came up and the immortal words 'show don't tell', something I couldn't not hear from my English Literature teacher for the best part of two years, has been stuck in my head ever since and is something that could be almost directly applicable to games. About six months ago I had a chance encounter with Peter Molyneux outside a lecture theatre in my department. Having slipped into a next-gen talk for inspiring prospective programmers into the industry, I asked an out-of-place but close-to-my-heart question during a Q&A about the links behind films and

Continued

the games we will be expecting in the future. Afterwards I managed to speak to him one-to-one. Despite his first question being about programming, I had to admit that programming was the last thing on my mind and that I was more interested in making films (at this stage with our student TV station). His face lit up and we had a brilliant conversation about films that had been recently released – he was particularly impressed that I'd avoided Tomb Raider: Cradle of Life. At the very end of our conversation, his last words to me were, "Well, we need you guys, too," and he handed me his card.

Having just entered a writing competition and won, my first ever serious writing work that will be experienced by a vast number of people is a mystery written for an online game called *Gumshoe Online*, a game introduced to me by **Edge**. In a personal way, I think stories can be easily integrated into games to make them better but that the people writing them should remember that a game is defined by its objectives and that for the story to be effective it needs to be subtle and underlying. I say this because, when I graduate, I want to write stories for games.
Chris Hemmens

Just about everyone agrees: we don't need fewer stories in games, we just need fewer bad stories.

For all its movie-rivalling turnover, and for all **Edge**'s trendy coffee-table looks, we all know how the home-owning public at large still feels about our beloved hobby: that it's a juvenile pursuit, only fit to occupy children and young men who should know better. Thank god then for Volatile games, whose remit, to quote their Studio Profile in E156, "is simple – games made by adults for adults, with all the sophisticated gameplay, artwork and themes this suggests."

At last! A company willing to lead gaming away from its little adolescent cul-de-sac and into a bright new world of art and culture, where it can finally take its place alongside books and movies as a genuinely enriching, cultural force for good. And Volatile's first, revolutionary product? "*Possession*, our zombie action game..."

Sigh.
Tim Sycamore

Aren't you being a little harsh on our undead friends? *Stubbs* has a fairly grown-up sense of satire, and *Resident Evil 4* was as mature in its presentation (if not its story) as any game this year.



Topic: pompous thread titles
What's your fave?
orooth

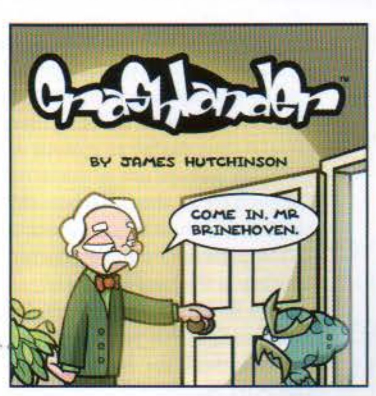
Games as Art, what a load of pretentious nonsense. This Fiskemannen fella needs knocking down a few notches.
fiskemannen

I read the Quarter To Three forums before this one – that makes Edge look like the Good Charlotte message board.
lightswitch sam

I love the pompous and the pretentious. I can't wait till someone makes a 'The Metaphysics of the Source Engine' thread. (I'd do it myself but I fear flaming.) Anyway, it's only pretentious if you don't understand it... right?
Shinji

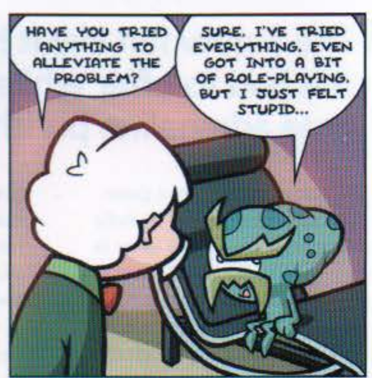
I wish people wouldn't say pretentious like it's a bad thing.
Devilheart StoryGun

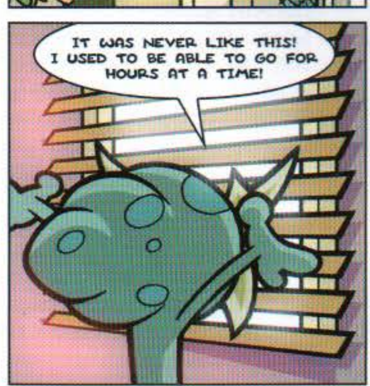
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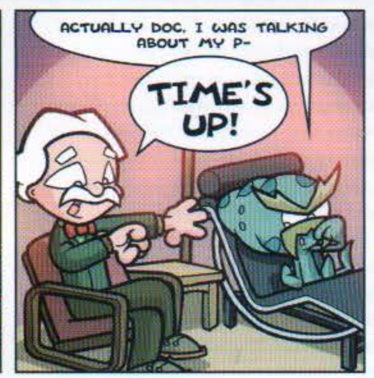


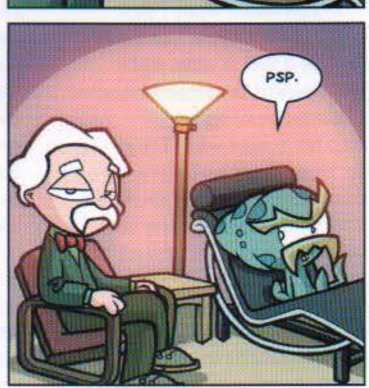












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